OF DISCRETION & EMOTIONS:

DECISION-MAKING AT MEET-THE-PEOPLE SESSIONS IN SINGAPORE

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A THESIS SUBMITTED

FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF SOCIAL SCIENCE

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY

NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE

2015

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the thesis is my original work and it has been written by me in its entirety. I have duly acknowledged all the sources of information which have been used in the thesis.

This thesis has also not been submitted for any degree in any university previously.

Anthony Victoria Michelle
July 2015

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS & DEDICATION

When I first applied to do my Masters in Sociology, I had originally intended for my thesis to be on the integration of a particular segment of expats in Singapore. While identity issues have always intrigued me, I had already been a Meet-the-People Sessions volunteer for about 1 year at that time, and it was only when I shared some of these experiences with Dr Leong Wai-Teng, that I realised a thesis on Meet-the-People Sessions may just be a little more interesting. This conversation, which took place because I was the only Masters student who signed up for a course on power that he was giving, started my thesis journey. Throughout this period, Dr Leong has been an indispensable source of guidance and support, and for that I am grateful.

This thesis would also not have been possible without my informants, who were mostly candid in sharing their experiences and helped contribute to the richness of the data obtained.

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Duncan and Marion Anthony, who have proven, through their life experiences, that nothing is impossible without a little bit of hard work and a whole lot of determination. Through countless sacrifices, they have ensured that my siblings and I would never want for anything, and I can only hope that I continue to make them proud. To my siblings, Valerie and Trevor Anthony, thank you for your humour and wit, especially during stressful times. They were definitely much needed!

This thesis is also dedicated to my two best friends, Adeline Hendriks and Vanessa Manoharan, who though not sociology graduates, were interested in knowing about my research and how I was progressing. They never failed to check in to ensure that I was alright and not in over my head. They also occasionally enforced de-stressing sessions over late-night movies, drinks, and the like (which were actually always more than welcome).

Last but not least, to my colleagues, who have been nothing but understanding as I juggled both work and graduate studies.

Finally, to my fellow batch mates, Yue Er, Ben, Bryan, Aaron and Jauhari, who pushed me to challenge myself and who also never failed to share anything of relevance that they came across. They have certainly made this graduate experience an unforgettable one.

All in all I have been blessed with an amazing group of family and friends. There are no words to explain how deeply appreciative I am of all the support showered on me during my graduate studies and the continued care and concern I receive each day of my life.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

Meet-the-People Sessions (MPS) were first introduced in Singapore by David Marshall in 1955, and then co-opted by the People's Action Party when it was part of the opposition in 1956. The actual function of MPS has been reduced to the writing of appeal letters in recent years, despite the original conception of MPS as a place for the MP to engage with residents on national and local issues they were concerned about. The current objectives of MPS are thus two-pronged – to help residents in their dealings with government agencies and to garner political support for the MP as well as the political party. Although it is largely understood that bureaucracies do not offer those exercising or practicing policies the latitude in terms of any form of agency and discretion or even space for emotions, this paper argues that these are the very components that make MPS in Singapore successful. The volunteers present not only categorise the residents they come across at MPS into various groups, but also draw on notions of genuine and less than genuine cases. A level of emotion on the part of both the residents and volunteers is also welcome within the MPS confines. These serve to contribute towards the success of the MPS institution in meeting both its objectives as stated above.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

> "I said to you that if elected, I would dedicate a day in every week to receive the people of Singapore, whether voters or not, whether from Cairnhill or not. Rich or poor, in order to enable me to understand your problems, to receive your advice, and to assist where I can assist…I shall receive you one day a week, with or without appointment…I shall do everything to assist all"
>
> - David Marshall, as he presented his cabinet at Empress Place on 6 April 1955 (as quoted in Tan, 2008:295)

Meet-the-People Sessions (MPS) were first introduced in Singapore by David Marshall in 1955. During the election campaign for the legislative assembly, Marshall had promised his constituents at Cairnhill that he would set aside one day weekly to meet them and listen to their issues or suggestions. The first MPS took place on a Saturday in June 1955, with about 100 to 150 people. When interviewed almost 30 years later, Marshall had explained his motivations for introducing MPS: "people should realise this is their government, and these arrogant civil servants were their servants in truth and in fact" (as quoted in Tan, 2008:297).

The People's Action Party later adopted the practice of MPS in 1956 and has not looked back since. While motivations now may differ from the original intentions outlined by Marshall, MPS has become an indispensable tool for governance in Singapore, with elected Members of Parliament (MPs) from other political parties also running their own MPS. MPS is seen as fulfilling a role unmatched by other modes of political communication and engagement. According to Minister Mentor Lee Kuan

Yew, “Singapore’s culture of ensuring that politicians are accessible to the people is a risk we take...but it also means we have connection with the people, which is a very big plus...It’s not just about making speeches and giving everyone a home or a good job, it’s the constant relationship that you maintain” (The Straits Times, 30 December 2009). The efficacy of MPS has gone beyond Singapore’s shores and it was reported that even China tried to put together a form of Meet-the-People Session, modelled after Singapore’s version, but only for lower-level cadres.

Despite its long history in Singapore and the continued popularity of Meet-the-People Sessions as an avenue for residents to seek assistance in dealing with various ministries and agencies in the bureaucracy, the MPS as an institution has hardly been studied. The fact that the MPS continues to be held weekly in almost all constituencies in Singapore and still attracts many residents each week in this day and age where social media has opened up even more access to Members of Parliament and there is a plethora of alternative avenues to acquire assistance, means that the MPS institution offers residents something the other avenues do not.

It has nevertheless been argued elsewhere that MPS is a highly bureaucratized affair, in a large part due to the routinization of processes involved (Sim, 2010). However, bearing in mind the fact that these sessions may stretch for longer than 4 hours and involve as many as 30 to 80 constituents per session, it is imperative that MPS is made up of more than just routines to follow as each resident comes forward and shares their issues. Every resident who comes to MPS asking for help in getting concessions often sees their case as unique and expects the MP and volunteers to take some time to truly understand their position before advising them accordingly or coming up with the letter of appeal necessary. While it has to be appreciated that the MP and volunteers would sometimes rely on prior understanding and categories of solutions to deal with both, the resident, and the issue at hand, they do definitely also have to spend more time and effort on some cases so that the appropriate help can be

given to the resident as well. It is notwithstanding then that there are decisions to be made at MPS on the level of help to be given to any particular resident and how this could be done. Relying simply on past experiences and routines that have been put in place would not fully encompass all the residents and cases that come through the doors at each MPS.

The research question this thesis will tackle then is: How are decisions made on the ground during MPS? Some of the sub-questions this raises are: Is every case treated equally? What factors influence these decisions to be made? How can the MP and MPS volunteers tell if a case is genuine and deserving of their attention? What do they do about people who are perceived as trying to find an easy way out of their problem through their MP via the MPS platform?

I thus seek to examine how decisions are made at MPS with regard to each individual request for assistance or appeal. I argue that even though MPS takes place within a broader bureaucratic structure in terms of the laws and policies already in place as well as the standard operating routine for the sessions, there is room for manoeuvre for the MP and volunteers involved in deciding not only how to deal with each constituent but also the extent of help each constituent should receive. Along this vein, the MP and volunteers use a level of subjective judgement about the character and genuine needs of each constituent. I further contend that it is precisely this flexibility on the ground that makes the MPS successful. This differentiation between those who deserve help and those who do not mean that the former find themselves in a better position to seek assistance through the MPS at the end of the day, even though MPS generally welcomes all residents and the MP will write letters of appeal on behalf of those who ask for them. In a sense then, the MPS brings emotions and a personal touch to the practical operation of the bureaucracy on the ground, while giving volunteers and the MP a level of discretion on how to approach the issues brought up. The volunteers nevertheless have to walk a thin line between managing

the emotions of those who go to MPS to seek help and appearing to give in too easily, especially with welfare assistance cases.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The existence of some level of latitude and decision-making in the public service is not a new concept. Despite the Weberian bureaucratic ideal largely subscribed to, studies elsewhere have shown how frontline public servants make decisions about who to help and what kind of help is given on a daily basis. In his study on street-level bureaucracy, Lipsky (2010:xiii) found that "the decisions of street-level bureaucrats, the routines they establish, and the devices they invent to cope with uncertainties and work pressures, effectively become the public policies they carry out". In other words, there is a dissonance between public policy, as written on paper and how it gets translated into practice. According to Lipsky, while street-level bureaucrats do have some form of standard operating procedures to follow as they attempt to meet policy objectives, they also have to act according to the facts of each case they are presented with. This means they often have to improvise their responses based on their past experiences and also their thoughts about what was happening before them at that moment.

Lipsky also asserted that when faced with complicated situations, street-level bureaucrats "search for the correct balance between compassion and flexibility on the one hand, and impartiality and rigid rule-application on the other hand" (Lispky, 2010:15). He outlined how they socially constructed their clients by assigning them to categories which would then inform their treatment of these individuals. Lipsky postulated the existence of worker bias, where street-level bureaucrats showed preference for some individuals over others because of both personal and societal prejudices. They would then rationalise their actions accordingly.

In his writing, Lipsky (2010:71) also explained an inherent contradiction faced by street-level bureaucrats: "On the one hand, service is delivered by people to people, invoking a model of human interaction, caring and responsibility. On the

other hand, service is delivered through a bureaucracy, invoking a model of detachment and equal treatment under conditions of resource limitations and constraints". Lipsky contends that this contradiction leads to 2 types of reactions, where street-level bureaucrats either become (i) advocates doing everything they can to help the clients, or (ii) alienated workers who are jaded because they feel that the interactions are not genuine and so become less concerned about helping the clients. It remains to be seen though if the volunteers at Meet-the-People Sessions in Singapore would also fall into these categories.

Nevertheless, a similar theme was also introduced by Hodder (2011) in his study of the Philippine bureaucracy. Hodder contended that the exercise of discretion by frontline public officers was not only practical as it meant decisions could be made more efficiently, but also positively changed the tone of the service and government to one that is more caring towards citizens. Additionally, Vinzant and Crothers (1998) previously explored the theme of discretion in their study of street-level leadership. They highlighted four sources of discretion: (i) when applying rules to specific cases, (ii) when judgements need to be made about people, (iii) as a mode of worker empowerment for frontline personnel, and (iv) when public employees operate independently of direct supervision. Despite the fact that all these studies took place in a different context, it is possible that some of these elements could be useful in explaining the space for decision-making at MPS as well.

While there is a general lack of research on Meet-the-People Sessions in Singapore, it is mentioned in some broader studies on the civil society. Categorically defined as citizen engagement with political leaders, it is often argued that for a developed country, Singapore lacks a robust civil society. Tan (2003:4) put forth that "Singapore's grassroots sector, the tight network of state- and party-sponsored organisations that replaced colonial civil society has grown in size and complexity…this development is part of a much more complicated process that is

aimed at shaping, even limiting, democratic possibilities rather than simply making space for more of them". While it may be argued that the civil society in Singapore has been overtaken by more partisan grassroots organisations, others find that the entire concept of civil society seems to be a farce in Singapore. Lee (2005:135) used the term "gestural politics" to explain that as the concept of civil society gains worldwide acceptance in the pursuit of democracy, the Singapore government has had to engage with the idea accordingly and outwardly portray this, even as civil society remains largely rhetorical and gestural. In other words, any effort being made to involve citizens in policy-making is subscribed to in form rather than in practice. The apparatus are thus put in place, but without any tangible outcomes.

A couple of studies that have looked specifically at political participation in Singapore have concluded that MPS seems to be an effective tool for this. In their study of channels of communication between the citizens and government, Tan and Chiew (1997:340) found that "the MP's Meet-the-People session was seen as the most effective channel for communicating the views of the citizens to the Government". They reported that 85% of the respondents surveyed were aware of MPS as a channel of communication and 24% believed it was most effective, when compared to alternatives such as letters to newspapers, contacting the Feedback Unit, sending letters directly to Ministries and visiting their Residents' Committees. This paper was written in 1997 though, and it would seem that the function of MPS has shifted since then to one that helps residents in their appeals to government agencies, and not so much as a vehicle for residents to share their views on policies with the MP. This point will be visited again later in the paper.

In another study, Ho (2003) argued that Singapore citizens were more likely to focus on transitional rather than gladiatorial or spectator activities, According to the hierarchical distribution he conceptualised, gladiatorial activities would comprise things such as holding or running for public office and becoming an active member in

a political party, while spectator activities would include attending an election rally and initiating a political discussion. Transitional activities, on the other hand, is where partaking in feedback channels such as the MPS, Feedback Unit and writing letters to the newspapers could be found. He offered three rationalisations for this: (i) that ordinary citizens simply did not have the resources needed for gladiatorial activities, (ii) political awareness is increasing among the populace but not to the extent of them wanting to become politicians and (iii) open channels of communication are preferred to the more static or one-sided ones under spectator activities.

In terms of the actual effectiveness of MPS as a way for citizens to resolve their issues, Chan (1976:108) contends that "The Member of Parliament is becoming the institutionalised channel of interest articulation and demand satisfaction for a large section of people in the constituencies, and the importance of the role of the MP towards the building of party strength and support in national politics would depend to an important extent on whether he can deliver the goods to the constituents." The use of the MPS platform as a political tool in the garnering of support and votes is undeniable and it is highly unusual for MPs and volunteers to turn away constituents asking for help, whether they believe they really needed the help or not. While there are no statistics currently available on how many appeals or letters written by MPs on behalf of their constituents actually get approved, Ho (2003:345) quoted that "The head of the Feedback Unit, Ow Chin Hock, noted that the chances of success for those who ask their MPs to help them solve problems could be as high as 60% for matters such as waiver of traffic summonses. However, when it comes to established policy matters, such as relating to deferment of National Service, chances are very low."

It would be interesting here to take a look also at how elected representatives in other countries serve their constituents. Singapore was previously part of Malaysia after the British colonial rule. It has been documented that as far back as the 1970s,

rural MPs in Malaysia made a point to visit every village within their constituency at least once every quarter (Ong, 1976). Apart from that, the MP would also have an office located within the market, for easy access by the residents. Urban MPs on the other hand, had Meet-the-People Sessions and constituency visits to common areas such as the market. The strategy of the urban MPs is thus not dissimilar to the current process in Singapore. In the United Kingdom (UK) on the other hand, MPs have offices located within the constituency they serve, where people could visit to discuss various matters they were grappling with. MPs in the UK also attend community functions as well as visit schools, markets and other areas to interact with their residents. It would thus appear that the difference in Singapore is the lack of an accessible office for the MP within the constituency (CCs and RCs do not perform this function). Furthermore, not all MPs in Singapore are full-time MPs and may thus not be available to residents at all times of the day, even if they had offices located within the constituency. Thus, instead of being accessible to residents during office hours, the Singapore system is one in which time has been set aside weekly for residents to meet their MP and seek his help. Nevertheless, some studies in Singapore have briefly touched on the volunteers at the grassroots level. As explained by Mauzy and Milne (2002:43), "Branches are the basic unit of the party…The PAP has branches in all 84 constituencies…The main branch work is to help manage grassroots activities during election campaigns and to assist MPs in their meet-the-people sessions or walkabouts in the constituency." It has to be acknowledged here that while MPS draws on grassroots volunteers, there are a number of people who volunteer only for the MPS. It would be interesting to study if perhaps the behaviours of volunteers at MPS towards constituents differ along these lines. Nevertheless, Paul and Tan (2003:7) set out that "Many join the grassroots for altruistic reasons, because they feel passionately for the PAP's political outlook, because the grassroots have become for them a special place for social interaction, because their involvement

could be a kind of insurance policy against any future trouble or even because they might enjoy such small perks as parking privileges". It also remains to be seen however if the motivations for volunteering affect how MPS volunteers carry out their duties and treat constituents who come needing some form of assistance or another.

It is clear from the research that has been undertaken that MPS has not been seen as a topic for research in and of itself, but always part of a wider study on political participation or citizen engagement. These studies also tend to focus on the needs and perspectives of the citizens, while the thought processes and subjectivities of both the MP and the volunteers involved in MPS have thus far not been studied. It is only in uncovering this that we can better appreciate MPS as a legitimate tool for the airing of grievances and seeking of assistance by constituents. Until we understand how the decisions are made, how can we assume that MPS works for those who need it most? The aim of this study therefore, is to uncover how decision-making comes into play during Meet-the-People Sessions and thus evaluate how this contributes to the overall effectiveness of MPS as an institution within the Singapore bureaucracy.

CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Describing Singapore as a depoliticized administrative state, Chan (1975) outlined three distinctive features that made it such. The first feature was the "increased power of the administrative and bureaucratic sector because of complex organisations and proliferation of development activities in society...bureaucracy is enlarging its power, influence and vesting its interests particularly where the weakness and the reduced role of the elected politician is apparent" (Chan, 1975:4). The second feature highlighted, in line with the first, was that the MP, while still performing important functions, was valuable only insofar as he had technocratic skills as well. The last feature was simply that power was completely concentrated in the hands of the leaders, who were believed to have the expertise necessary to make the right judgements.

This form of bureaucratic administration still continues today. The People's Action Party (PAP), which has been in power in Singapore since its independence in 1964, is headed by a Central Executive Committee (CEC) which is led by the Secretary-General of the party. In an effort to prevent any potential takeover by pro-Communists, the PAP introduced a cadre system in 1958. This was based on the Vatican system of the Pope appointing his cardinals and vice-versa. As such, the CEC appointed the cadre and the cadre got to elect the CEC. The selection of cadre members is a rigorous process that includes recommendations, reviews and interviews. Non-cadre or ordinary party members are therefore excluded from party leadership and administration. As such, the main roles of non-cadre members include running the MPS and PAP kindergartens (Chan, 1976).

Bearing in mind the largely bureaucratic nature of the state, it would make sense then to study MPS, as an organisation of the state, in terms of a bureaucratic framework. While it has to be acknowledged that the MPS is not officially part of the

bureaucracy, since it is held by elected (and sometimes even non-elected MPs), it is very much linked to the bureaucracy. As majority of the MPs in Singapore come from the ruling party and so do all the Ministers, the line between what happens at MPS and the bureaucracy is blurred. This is mainly due to the fact that letters and appeals written during MPS are sent to various government ministries and agencies, which are headed by fellow party comrades. It is thus not uncommon for MPs to take up urgent or serious cases that came up during MPS directly with the Minister in charge of the portfolio, even as the official MPS process is followed. As such, both the cases and the MPs toggle between MPS and the bureaucracy effortlessly. This further reiterates that a bureaucratic framework would be apt to study the MPS institution.

Originally espoused by Weber, bureaucracy was seen as being achieved through formal rationality, "equated with the continued long-term functioning at maximum efficiency of the apparatus as presently constituted, a process disrupted by persons pursuing substantive goals not consistent with its status quo operation" (Eisen, 1978:65). The following characteristics may be understood as features of a bureaucracy:

> "well-defined spheres of competence, continuous performance of official duties, an orderly hierarchy of control whose possible ascent permits a career, appointments and promotion based on competence (including educational certificates, special examinations and on-the-job performance), decision-making based on written records, a fixed salary, separation of office from the personal property of the incumbent, and a style of decision-making which consists of applying general rules to particular cases"
>
> (Markoff, 1975:479)

Weber did not stop there though and carried on to explain that there were adverse effects to bureaucracies. He contended that the dogmatic pursuit of rationality could lead to a level of irrationality through the creation of an "iron cage of rationality" (Weber, 1905). In other words, a focused attention towards upholding rationality in its various aspects would simply put bureaucracies in a bind and create a level of inefficiency and impracticality. It remains to be seen, however, if the space for decision-making at MPS means that this iron cage can be avoided or circumvented in any way.

There have also been various bureaucratic alternatives introduced over the years, which could also help explain the rationale behind how MPS operates (although it has to be acknowledged that MPS was already in motion by the time these concepts were introduced). One of these is New Public Management (NPM), which is essentially the bringing over of market principles into the bureaucratic sphere. In NPM, the goals are thus also more market-oriented, as governments seek to "improve governmental performance by emphasizing customer service, decentralisation, market mechanisms, cross-functional collaboration and accountability for results" (Page, 2005). NPM is often compared to the Neo-Weberian State, where, instead of performing as a business by taking over all market principles, a more cautious and blended approach is espoused, by retaining some distinct public service qualities, even as various market-oriented strategies are put in place (Badie et. al, 2011).

A bureaucratic framework is apt for studying MPS in Singapore due to the highly bureaucratic nature of the state. It is my argument here though that while MPS may outwardly perform on a bureaucratic level in terms of its processes and routines, there is some space for the MP and volunteers on the ground in terms of decisions on who deserves help and what forms of help to give. This space is essential especially since MPS deals mainly with appeals and complaints. Many constituents go to these

sessions seeking assistance against institutionalised rules or laws they may have either flouted or are unable to cope with and hope for a level of leniency to be exercised towards them. A strict adherence to the laws in place would make these sessions redundant as these constituents would not be able to get the help they need. It is perhaps this manoeuvring space that prevents MPS from being subsumed in an iron cage of rationality and gives it a more human or personal touch.

> "Perfect authority...is impossible to maintain; those further down the chain of command will inevitably exercise their delegated powers with discretion simply because there is no other way. The net result is a more provisional sense of institutional power, where control must necessarily be incomplete...must also involve a reasonable element of discretion and an openness to reinterpretation."
>
> (Barnes, 1988:193)

While the bureaucracy in Singapore is powerful and pervasive, the MP and volunteers at MPS have a level of discretion in decision-making on the ground. This discretion of course can only be applied with reason and within the structural constraints already in place of terms of the laws they are dealing with. It would thus be interesting to study exactly how this discretion and decision-making capabilities manifests themselves in practice during MPS.

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

I. A QUALITATIVE STUDY

> "Every graduate student who is tempted to employ a qualitative design should confront one question, 'Why do I want to do a qualitative study?' and then answer it honestly. Some novice researchers...see qualitative research as a way of avoiding numbers in general and statistics in particular. So long as question and method are well-matched, a choice made on such personal grounds is neither improper nor dysfunctional."
>
> (Locke et. al., 1987:88)

As explained comprehensively in the quote above, choosing to carry out this research through either a qualitative or quantitative study was a big methodological decision in itself. The main factor in making this key decision had to be the research question undertaken. In the explanation of the research topic and question above, I am interested in the discretion and subjective decision-making processes of the volunteers involved in MPS as they bring laws and policies down from an abstract to everyday level in dealing with residents who come forward with a variety of issues and problems.

Based on the needs of the research topic and question, I made the decision that a qualitative study would be more useful for me. This is in line with the point put forth by Locke et. al. (1987:84) that in qualitative research, "The focus of attention is on the perceptions and experiences of participants. What individuals say they believe, the feelings they express and explanations they give, are treated as significant realities...there is a profoundly relativistic

view of the world. The researcher is not seeking the kind of verifiable truth that functions in a cause and effect model of reality." I contend that in their efforts to help the constituents who go to MPS in hopes of resolving various issues, each volunteer would draw on their own notions of those who deserve help versus those who do not and are merely looking for an easy way out. These notions would however differ from one volunteer to another based on their backgrounds and worldviews as well as the residents and issues they had come into contact with over their time as a volunteer.

A quantitative methodology, in terms of handing out questionnaires, doing content analyses of documents or carrying out a systematic field observation, would not be able to provide me with as rich an avenue to uncover and understand the thought processes of the volunteers at these sessions. To achieve these objectives, a mixture of participant observation and interviews with the volunteers involved in MPS was used instead.

Due to the nature of my involvement in MPS and the pre-research arguments put forth at the beginning of this paper, this study could not follow a grounded approach as such, where researchers go into the field with nothing more than a research question (Neuman, 2000). Nevertheless, I still aimed for *verstehen* as a guiding epistemological principle, through "understanding the phenomenon or event under study from the interior" (Flick, 2002:25).

II. THE SOCIAL CONTEXT

It was pointed out in the Introduction above that MPS has become entrenched as a way of life in Singapore. All MPs, even those from opposition parties have one day a week set aside to meet their constituents and help them with their problems through the writing of letters to the appropriate

organisations, more often than not government or government-linked. This essentially means that all constituencies in Singapore run MPS. For this paper, I studied the MP and volunteers at an MPS in one of the newer constituencies in Singapore. This constituency has many young families as well as three-generational households.

Neuman (2000:146) postulated that "Attention to social context means that a qualitative researcher notes what came before or what surrounds the focus of the study. It also implies that the same events or behaviours can have different meanings in different cultures or historical eras." When it comes to the different constituencies in Singapore, it has to be appreciated that there are many differences in needs as well. These differences make it imperative that I contextualise my study in terms of the specific demographics of the constituency in which the MPS takes place. This flows from the fact that the issues and concerns of the constituency observed may be different from that of other constituencies.

The fact that the constituency under study may differ from others need not be seen as a grave limitation to the generalizability of the study. Payne and Williams (2005) compellingly argued that qualitative research are open to mostly moderate generalizations, in terms of its scope and hypothetical character. Even as this study took place in a specific context, it is hoped that the findings in terms of not only how emotions and discretion are used on the ground, but also how volunteers carve a space for this within the bureaucratic structure, would be relevant to and resonate with the MPS in other constituencies as well.

III. PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

Having already gained access to the site and being a volunteer myself, this research partially used participant observation as a methodology to strengthen findings. According to Dewalt et. al. (1998:259), "the method of participant observation includes the explicit use in behavioural analysis and recording of the information gained from participating and observing."

Participant observation was necessary to answer the research question on how volunteers managed both, the latitude afforded to them, and their emotions as well as that of the residents, during the sessions. Participation observation allowed me a better appreciation of the context the MP and volunteers find themselves in as they meet constituents during the MPS. This context within which they operate was then used as a base from which to develop possible questions to further understand how decisions are made at MPS with regard to each individual request for assistance or appeal, as this was followed by interviews with the volunteers involved.

Dewalt et. al. (1998) also made some categorical distinctions between various strands of participant observation based on the actual degrees of participation versus observation. Based on their classification, I would be a "complete participant", where the researcher is a member of the group being studied. Being a complete participant offers me some advantages. First, access to the site was not something I had to worry about since I was already part of the population under study. I had been volunteering for MPS at this particular constituency for about 2 years already when this study commenced. In this time, I had been a writer as well as letter editor. Second, forming bonds and ties in terms of rapport with the people involved, was also something I already had.

This was particularly useful as the MPS is an inherently political tool in Singapore and newcomers or strangers may be initially looked upon suspiciously. Lastly, being a complete participant made me privy to the full range of cases dealt with at these sessions as well as the briefings that took place prior to and after each session. These briefings outside of the period of the official MPS are important platforms at which directions are laid out for volunteers by the MP or Branch Secretary.

Being a complete participant could potentially also bring about some disadvantages. My close level of involvement with the subject matter meant that it would have been easy for me to take many things for granted and perhaps not see how they relate to the research at hand. It was therefore important for me to take a step back as I noted my observations and constantly ask myself how these relate to the research question and if perhaps there was more to be said on various issues.

IV. INTERVIEWS

Johnson and Sackett (1998:301) conceptualised interview research as that which "relies entirely on research subjects as sources of ethnographic knowledge". The point here is that through interviews, researchers expect participants to rationalise how they behave and why. This makes interview research particularly relevant to this study as the aim was to understand how decisions were made by the MP and volunteers on the ground as they were faced with the contending forces of constituents in need of help on one hand and the bureaucracy in terms of laws and policies in place on the other. It was hoped that the volunteers involved in the MPS would be able to articulate how they went about doing this during one-on-one semi-structured interviews. These

interviews were also recorded so as to allow me to better participate in the conversation at hand and not have to worry about taking down too much notes.

I opted for interviews rather than focus groups as the presence of one clear leader, the MP, or possibly even the Branch Secretary, in the context of a focus group, would skew the results and I may end up with just thoughts these leaders had. Even taking both the MP and Branch Secretary out of the equation would not solve the problem as there was a clear hierarchy among volunteers, with those working in the Community Centres and Residents' Committees having noticeably more say on issues.

The interviews adapted the components of an ethnographic interview outlined by Spradley (1979), which included (i) making explicit the purpose of the study, (ii) giving a comprehensive explanation of the various ethnographic components such as the use of recording devices and need for native language explanations, as well as (iii) the use of ethnographic questions – descriptive, structural and contrast. The challenge I faced here as a researcher who was also an insider was for those I interviewed to tell me everything, even things they felt I already knew. In order to understand where they were coming from when it came to the decisions they made on the ground, I needed them to paint me a full picture and not make any assumptions on what I already knew about the situation. This is something I had to reiterate to my informants throughout the interview process. Looking specifically at Spradley's (1979) classification of the different types of questions, I relied mostly on experience and native-language questions. While I peppered these with some grand- and mini-tour questions, some respondents found the grand- and mini-tour questions puzzling since I should have already known the MPS process, although they tried their best to answer them anyway.

With regard to making explicit the purpose of this study, the research was conducted overtly and informed consent was sought from the MP and volunteers. Thorne (1980:285) summed up informed consent as that which is "knowledgeable, exercised in a situation of voluntary choice, made by individuals who are competent or able to choose freely". All those approached therefore had a choice not to take part in the study. Bearing in mind the structural hierarchy, with the MP being the leader, it was possible that the volunteers may have felt compelled to agree once the MP did. As a researcher, I also informed volunteers that that had no bearing on anything and they were free to exercise their options. Thorne (1980) further elaborated that informed consent could only be obtained through a description of the risks and benefits involved. As this study may be conceived of as being somewhat politically sensitive, the MP and informants were briefed accordingly prior to making their decisions on whether or not to take part in this research. Only MPS volunteers were interviewed for this study, of which many were appeal writers. While residents are important to the functioning of the MPS, they were out of the scope of the specific topic being researched.

V. DATA ANALYSIS

Analysis of the data generated through participant observation and interviews began with coding so as to group and make sense of the large amount of data acquired. As explained by Coffey and Atkinson (1996:26),

> "Many analyses of qualitative data begin with the identification of key themes and patterns...All researchers need to be able to organise, manage and retrieve the most meaningful bits of our data."

In his paper, Ezzy (2002b) postulated four different types of coding qualitative researchers may choose from depending on the nature of their research – (i) content analysis, (ii) thematic analysis and grounded theory, (iii) narrative analysis and (iv) cultural studies and semiotics. All these methods of data analysis do not seem as amenable to my research as coding in thematic analysis and grounded theory. Coding in thematic analysis and grounded theory essentially consists of three phases: open coding, axial coding and selective coding. Open coding is the initial phase that allows an exploration of the data acquired, while axial coding involves drawing links between codes and pre-existing theories. Selective coding, as the final part, involves extracting a core code around which the analysis can focus. By using this method, I was able to better use the data gathered and draw patterns on how the volunteers arrived at their decisions regarding constituents and the cases they come to MPS with.

Ezzy (2002b) also explained that content analysis on the other hand, is somewhat quantitative in nature and would be more suitable for researchers who have already identified key categories before the analysis. This was certainly not the case for my research since I hoped to draw categories from my interviews with informants rather than have them pre-determined. The basic understanding of content analysis is the introduction of statistics through the quantification of coding. In his evaluation of content analysis, Berg (2004) put forth that content analysis would serve researchers better as an analysis rather than a complete research tool. This seems to agree with Franzosi's explanation of the uses of referential content analysis to "capture the complexity of language in the production of meaning" (2004:551). The portrayals evident in a text, in terms of the differential weight given to different people and events point to a wider ideological discourse and can be read as such. It would seem then that the main limitation of content analysis is the fact that the

quantification of codes can give researchers an overview of the contents of a text and the representational aspects of people and things involved, but does not go further than that. Nevertheless, content analysis does not seem the most appropriate method of data analysis for this topic as a quantification of codes would lead to a loss of breadth and depth in the explanations and descriptions given by those interviewed. As this was very much an exploratory study, the richness of data was crucial and had to be used to arrive at any possible conclusion.

Narrative analysis, as yet another possible method, consists of comparing and contrasting stories told by various informants on a particular topic as they turn seemingly meaningless occurrences into more meaningful events. While this may be somewhat relevant to my study, the focus on interpretations, meanings and purposes in the eyes of the informants would not answer my research question on how they arrive at their decisions during MPS. Reissman (1993) took us through three examples of critical narrative analysis by looking at (i) how the narratives are determined, (ii) the aspects that are interpreted and (iii) meanings of the narratives. It is clear from her examples that the one potential pitfall of narrative analysis is that it gives the author too much authority in deciding the meaning of the narrative as they get to decide not only which portions of the interview to include and not, but also how to frame and contextualise what was said. The method could also lead to a disproportionate focus on linguistic choices thus excluding the interactional aspect of the conversation.

Cultural studies and semiotics on the other hand use pre-existing theories to interpret data in line with broader cultural and social processes, which seems

to have a more macro focus than the immediate topic of the study, since I was looking at more micro decision-making on the part of volunteers and the MP.

Ethnographic Decision Tree Modelling has been introduced as a possible tool in the study of decision-making. This method "uses ethnographic fieldwork techniques to elicit from the decision-makers themselves their decision criteria, which are then combined in the form of a decision tree, table or flowchart" (Gladwin, 1989:9). It has been argued that this method reduces researcher bias as it relies on first-hand narratives and accounts to come up with a final model that can be tested for accuracy. While this method may not be as amenable to non-linear or non-procedural decision-making or even when many decisions are being made on a concurrent basis, the reliance on first-hand accounts and narratives will be adhered to in this research.

VI. OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

One of the major considerations for this research was if the findings would have negative implications for the MP and volunteers involved. The political context in Singapore is one in which the PAP has come to be the dominant party since independence and recent elections show that they are losing favour with the electorate. While my experience as a volunteer for the MPS showed that the fact that there is space for discretion and emotions only serves to make it a more effective vehicle for appeals and complaints by constituents, I nevertheless took precautions to ensure the confidentiality of my informants and used synonyms throughout this paper. The constituency at which the fieldwork was undertaken would also not be revealed.

Being very much a part of the population being studied, there was also a very real danger of 'going native' for me. This tension between the need to be

part of the group and the need to remain detached has been articulated effectively by Wax (1980:273):

> "Fieldworkers could not 'go native' even if the 'natives' permitted. They are tied to their discipline, and bear the imprints of its training, as well as of their upbringings...They must learn to observe, to participate and to share while being able to record compare and analyze, thus moving back and forth between being associated with their hosts and with their discipline"

The problem is exacerbated because this is not a field I will enter and then leave. The field has become very familiar to me over the years and I am now just seeing it with a different lens, that of a social researcher. To be effective in my research pursuit, I therefore had to balance what had become familiar with possible ways of approaching the field from a social research angle.

Various researchers have argued on the need for social research to serve a beneficial purpose. In an article on her experience with the Institutional Review Board, Rambo was told that she should not publish her research as not only was there limited generalizability, it also had "no benefit to anyone" (Rambo, 2007:357). Ezzy (2002a:36), on the other hand, argued that "social research serves a broader function by providing general 'enlightenment' about the contexts, structures and nuances of a particular issue". My research is exploratory in the sense that not much has been written on MPS in Singapore, and almost nothing at all on how even though MPS takes place within a broader bureaucratic structure, there is room for manoeuvre for the MP and volunteers

involved in deciding not only how to deal with each constituent but also the extent of help each constituent should receive. Nevertheless, it is hoped that this study will show how MPS changes the relationship between the citizens and the state through the very flexibility it affords in dealing with wider bureaucratic structures. In doing so, I hope this research opens up the possibility of moving, in even more aspects, from an impersonal and removed bureaucracy to one that is perhaps more attuned to the needs and emotions of the people on the ground.

CHAPTER 5: BACKGROUND ON THE CONSTITUENCY STUDIED

I. MPS PROCESS

The constituency studied as part of this research is considered a relatively new one. As electoral boundaries in Singapore are re-drawn and revised with each General Election, new constituencies are created while others get absorbed to form even larger constituencies. While it is impossible for me to reveal the year in which this constituency was formed without readers being able to identify it, the fact that the constituency was formed rather recently has some bearing on the volunteers at the Meet-the-People Sessions as well.

As the MPS process differs from constituency to constituency, a brief overview of the flow at the constituency studied is a must. At this particular constituency alone, the MPS process has changed a few times in the past three years in a bid to increase efficiency and ensure volunteers would not need to stay too late into the night. The current process starts off with the resident being given a queue number upon entering the door and proceeding to the registration counter manned by two volunteers, where their details are either drawn up or added into the system (for those who have never been to the MPS before). These details include their full names, Identity Card numbers, addresses, incomes and occupations. Once that is done, the residents are directed to the waiting area until their numbers are called up by yet another volunteer, who is positioned at the door between the waiting and writing areas.

The writing area is the most highly-staffed section of the process. At least six writers are present at the writing area during each session, all with laptops and ‘counters’ of their own. These counters are made up of a table and two chairs placed opposite the writer so they would be able to communicate easily with the residents. The laptops have a similar programme to the one used

for registration so a simple click on the name of the resident would allow writers to view their registration details and type in their letters accordingly. The MP at this constituency usually floats from table to table; meeting residents and asking for a brief summary of their issues, before letting them know that the volunteer at the table is well-equipped to assist them with their issues. For those with more difficult or complicated issues, the MP sometimes pulls up a chair and spends more time listening to their issues and advising them accordingly before pointing out what he could do to help them, which the writer would then follow up on as he goes over to meet another resident at another counter.

After speaking to the residents, the volunteers would type their letters of appeal or complaint into the system and the residents are reminded that they would receive a reply from the agency in question within two to three weeks. Once the resident leaves the counter, the next number is called up and the process repeats itself. Once the writers save the letters written in the system, they are routed to two editors, situated in yet another room separated from the writing area by a door, who review and edit the letters in terms of contents and language as the session goes on. These editors then print the final copies of the letters and the MP signs them all at the end of the session, before they are placed in sealed envelopes to be sent to the relevant agencies the following day.

For residents who need welfare assistance in terms of rations and vouchers but not letters, they are brought directly to the welfare counter when their number is called and skip the writers' altogether. There are some who require letters and welfare assistance as well though.

The layout and MPS process at this constituency is graphically represented below. It has to be noted, however, that the MPS process and layout differ from constituency to constituency, as the MP, Branch Chairman and Secretary all work together in finding a process that works best for the needs of their constituency as well as the kinds of problems they deal with most often. The layout and process represented here are thus not necessarily representative of other constituencies.

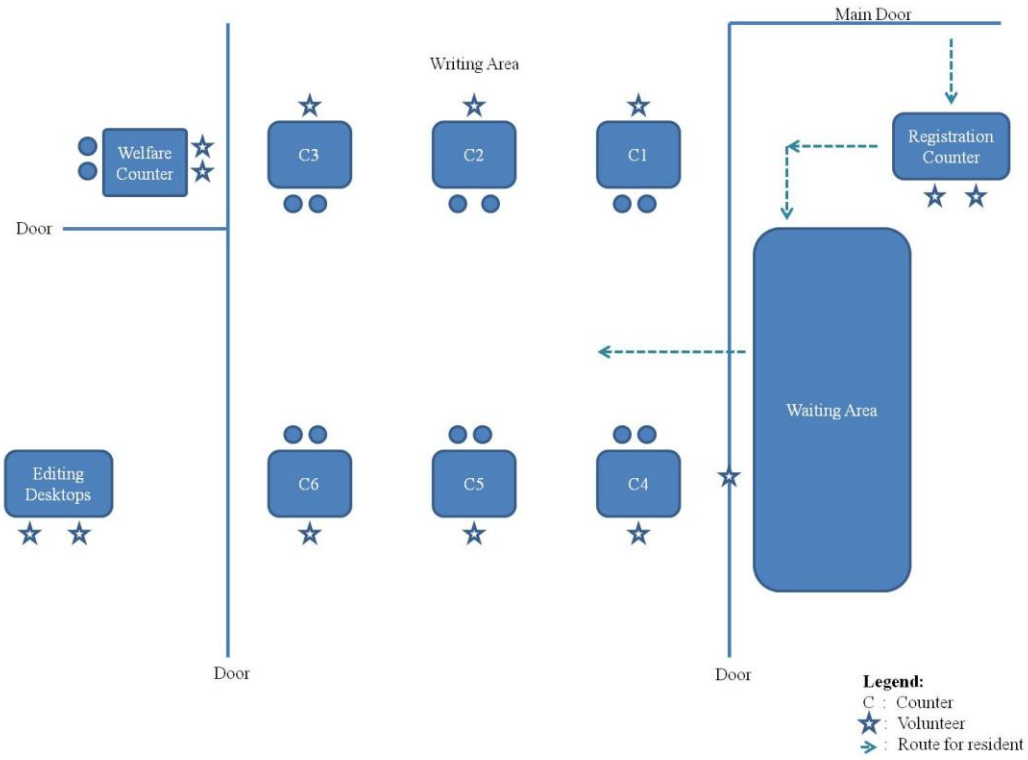

Figure 1: The MPS Process

II. PROFILE OF VOLUNTEERS

The constituency studied officially has about 30 MPS volunteers, but only 10 to 15 are present during any given session. The volunteers are almost evenly split in terms of gender and the racial profile mirrors the racial distribution found in the population at large. In terms of years served as MPS

volunteers, this constituency has two distinct but evenly-distributed groups, one that has ten years or more of experience and another with less than five years.

While there is a wide age range for the volunteers, spanning from twenty to slightly over sixty years old, the jobs or duties performed by the volunteers tend to be somewhat related to their age and educational qualifications. The younger volunteers tend to be more highly educated, with most of them having gotten their degrees or currently pursuing a university education. These volunteers are most often found to be at the editing desktops or writing counters. The welfare counter on the other hand, is perpetually taken care of by two older volunteers who have been serving in both MPS and grassroots for more than ten years each. They are thus not only familiar with the rules and regulations regarding the disbursement of welfare assistance but also know most of the residents who come their way, having met them a part of their grassroots activities. Similarly, the registration counter is usually also manned by people who are more familiar with the constituency, the older volunteers who are also involved in grassroots activities. The volunteer straddling the waiting and writing areas, who calls out numbers for residents to proceed to the writing area, is often older and less educated than the writers and editors. The functions performed by the volunteers are thus assigned based on the perceived level of intellect and abilities required.

Of the 30 MPS volunteers in the constituency studied, at least 85% are involved in grassroots activities. Some examples of grassroots activities include celebratory dinners to mark special occasions such as New Year's Day, Chinese New Year, and the like, as well as involvement in committees or interest groups that range from a focus on sports to culture and even various age-related activities. This means that they are highly familiar not only with the

area but also the residents living within. Through the many programmes and activities organised at the grassroots level, these volunteers come into regular contact with residents from all over the constituency and are sometimes even approached for advise and solutions to issues outside of the MPS setting. In terms of motivations in volunteering for the Meet-the-People Session, many of these volunteers explained that their role as a grassroots volunteer simply did not afford them the necessary space and opportunity to effectively assist residents who came their way. In a nutshell, many of these MPS volunteers were grassroots volunteers first and then transitioned to MPS volunteers. As grassroots activities are not overtly politically-linked, these volunteers felt they would be able to better help residents through MPS instead. Some of the other grassroots volunteers admitted to having been pressured to become MPS volunteers because of their high profile during grassroots activities which led to many residents going to them with problems. As the constituency in question is relatively new, some were also previously grassroots and MPS volunteers at other constituencies who were then asked to come over to help out at the constituency studied when it first started. The motivations of these volunteers for joining grassroots activities were wide-ranging, from (i) reaping the benefits in terms of priority housing and school placement for their children as well as parking benefits within the constituency, to (ii) wanting to be familiar with other residents living within the area and (iii) a genuine interest in having a stake in the way their community was organised. Those who are currently only MPS volunteers tend to be younger and desire doing something meaningful with their free time outside of school and work.

A table summarising the profile of the volunteers interviewed is available in Appendix One.

III. PROFILE OF ISSUES FACED BY RESIDENTS

The kinds of issues faced by residents differ from constituency to constituency in Singapore. More often than not, the range of issues is dependent on the make-up of the population within the constituency. This section of the paper thus aims to familiarise readers with the top five issues residents living within the constituency studied come to MPS for. This top five is based on the knowledge and experience of the researcher and not an official listing.

While the success rates of these appeals are not officially made known, an understanding of the types of issues volunteers have to deal with is an important step towards a broader appreciation of their thoughts and decision-making process with regard to each appeal and request brought forward by a resident.

(A) Childcare

The constituency studied as part of this research is very much considered one of the newer towns in Singapore and has a high percentage of young couples and families, especially when compared to older constituencies. The proportion of young couples (i.e. married within the last five years) is disproportionately higher in this constituency. Many of these couples have very young children, even as both the husband and wife work full-time. The issue of finding someone to care for the young children is thus a major issue in this constituency. While some couples are fortunate enough to be able to leave their children with grandparents and other relatives, others are not as lucky and need to find alternative caregivers. Many of these young couples are however also averse to hiring Foreign Domestic Workers just to care for the kids and so the demand for infant- and childcare centres is very high in this area.

Even though there have been an exponential increase in the number of infant- and childcare centres within the past three years, demand for vacancies still far exceed the number of slots available. It is thus not surprising that infant- and childcare takes the top position in the number of appeals written at MPS.

Most of these couples usually first try approaching these infant- and childcare centres, only to be rejected and informed that they can choose to be included in the waiting list, which could sometimes stretch to more than 200 names. After trying their luck at a handful of centres, many end up angry and frustrated. They thus turn up at MPS hoping to get the one or two slots they urgently need so that one of the parents (usually the wife) would not need to stop working altogether to stay home and care for the children. Quite a number of these couples are so desperate that they would even consider infant- and childcare centres run by private operators (i.e. not owned by PAP or NTUC), which charge much higher fees.

At the constituency studied, appeal letters on infant- and childcare vacancies were previously sent directly to the centre the parents were most interested in enrolling their child in. As of late however, the letters are directed to the Early Childhood Development Agency, the organisation that oversees all the infant- and childcare centres in Singapore. An exact rate of success for this kind of appeal is not available, but there are a number of couples who come back a second or third time as even though some help was given, like moving them up the waiting list or placement in an infant- or childcare centre outside of the constituency, the results were not what the parents were hoping for.

(B) Financial

While the disproportionately high number of young couples and families in the constituency face mainly infant- and childcare issues, financial matters is something others living in the area face.

Many of the residents who fall in this category come to MPS with various government-related bills (e.g. conservancy charges, utilities, electricity) on hand and explain that they are unable to afford the amounts charged as a result of their low-paying jobs. A large number of them do not have much formal education and are thus stuck in these low-paying jobs with long working hours. Many of these individuals also have larger families and crowded homes.

It is important to note here that these residents normally would have tried to make their own arrangements to pay for the outstanding bills by instalments and then failed to keep to the arrangements due to their financial situations. This often leads to the agencies sending them letters of demand for the entire outstanding amount to be paid, failing which, the services would cease. By this point, the residents find themselves with their backs against the wall and thus go to MPS with the hope that a letter from the MP would either buy them more time or even lower the amount altogether as the agency takes into account the financial strain facing the family. On top of writing the appeal letters, it is quite common for the volunteers to also refer these residents to the Community Development Centre for some form of longer-term financial assistance.

The group of residents asking for financial help at MPS also comprises residents who come simply for welfare assistance. In other words, they do not actually need an appeal letter written to an agency, but hope to collect welfare rations for themselves. At the constituency studied, these rations are made up

of canned food, rice, instant noodles and other dry provisions as well as vouchers to be used at supermarkets. These are often older people, some of whom live in the rental housing available within the constituency.

(C) Rental Housing

Rental housing is somewhat new to the constituency studied and also has its fair share of issues. Residents who rent a unit directly from HDB have to choose from either the (a) Family Scheme, where two people who are related live in the unit, or the (b) Joint Singles Scheme, where HDB may be able to provide one applicant (unmarried, widowed or divorced individual above 21) with another similar individual applicant as a housemate. The total household gross income for rental housing eligibility must not exceed $1,500 per month. Another condition is that "Applicants with children who are able to provide accommodation for them in their own homes or whose children have the financial ability to provide alternative accommodation for them would not be eligible to rent HDB flats" (HDB InfoWEB, 2015).

It is not surprising here that many of the rental housing issues come from those under the Joint Singles Scheme, since some of them find themselves living with total strangers. This leads to an array of issues, such as the inability to get along, distrust and even physical violence. As many of these individuals do not have children or relatives to rely on, they rely on the MP to help put them out of their misery. These appeals for rental housing range from asking to be moved to another rental unit so they would not have to deal with their housemate to simply asking for the housemate to be thrown out as they suspect the other individual might have stolen their belongings.

For those under the Family Scheme, the issue faced tends to be of a more financial nature. Even though rental housing is heavily subsidised by the

Housing Development Board, the utilities and electricity bills, as well as the cost of daily necessities, add up, and many are unable to afford everything with the less than $1,500 earned a month by the household. Some thus go to MPS so the MP could help appeal for an even lower rent as well as higher subsidies for utilities and electricity. There have also been residents under the Family Scheme who head to MPS to urge the MP to help them deal with neighbours from other rental units, who may be loud and drunk late into the night.

Apart from that, there are various individuals who come to MPS to appeal for rental housing eligibility. Most of them are elderly couples who the Housing Development Board assessed to have failed the "assessment of whether they can afford other housing options and whether they have family support" (HDB InfoWEB, 2015). These couples usually explain though that their children have their own families and do not earn nearly enough funds or to also support them or space to offer them within their flats.

(D) Traffic Offences

Traffic offences may not seem like much to be coming to the MP for help on, but this is definitely a regular occurrence. Many residents who come to MPS on traffic offences-related issues tend to be either (i) from the lower class or (ii) those that drive for a living (e.g. taxi drivers, chauffeurs, and delivery or despatch riders).

For those from the first group, the concern is very much a financial one. They usually come with more than one notice of traffic offence and are unable to afford the fines, which can range from $30 to $500, depending on the severity of the offence. Many in this category tend to have already used up the agency's goodwill in waiving their fine for their first traffic offence and were unable to get their subsequent fines waived. While appeal letters are still

written and sent by the MP, most of these cases are unsuccessful simply due to the fact that most of these individuals are repeat offenders, usually for speeding or parking at non-parking areas.

These offences are usually more severe in terms of consequences for the second group, those who drive for a living. On top of the financial burden of the fines imposed, the demerit points given often put their jobs on the line as well. As with the first group, a lot of them are repeat offenders and the points accumulate to put them in a desperate position where they would lose their livelihoods altogether for being unable to drive by law as a result of their high number of demerit points. Those in this group tend to ask for appeal letters that focus on waiving the demerit points but keeping the fines imposed, which they will pay for in acknowledgement of their offence. Although this arrangement is largely unsuccessful as the authorities try to keep unsafe drivers off the roads, an appeal letter is usually sent on their behalf by the MP anyway.

(E) Applications to Live in Singapore

Unsuccessful applications through the Immigrant and Checkpoints Authority (ICA) for citizenship and permanent residence have also led to a somewhat significant number of people coming to MPS for help. As ICA does not provide reasons for rejection, many residents are blindsided and unsure of how to proceed to ensure their families are kept together in Singapore, without the need for one or a few members to leave after a few months only to return to Singapore in order to fulfil Visa requirements. In many of these cases, one of the spouses and the children are Singaporean, but the other spouse has difficulty staying in Singapore on a permanent basis. Other examples include cases where applications for grandparent caregivers who were originally from another country are rejected and where applications for citizenship for

foreigners (mostly uneducated, unskilled and from poorer countries) married to Singaporeans are also denied. In all of these cases, the residents usually appeal to ICA on their own before handing the case over to the MP for help. More often than not though, the MP is also unable to do much other than write in a general appeal since the grounds for rejection by ICA were not disclosed.

Some residents try for Long-term Visit Passes for their loved ones after being rejected multiple times for permanent residence applications. Many use this as an interim measure while they submit the permanent residence applications repeatedly until successful. The problem with Long-term Visit Passes is that they do expire eventually and sometimes even before permanent residence has been granted. As such, some residents do come to MPS with appeals to lengthen the validity of the Long-term Visit Pass while they await yet another decision by ICA.

The issue here is exacerbated because it is widely believed that ICA grants citizenship and permanent residence on a quota basis and so residents are more than willing to keep trying until they are successful. The number of people who come back to MPS for re-appeals on these issues thus remains relatively high.

CHAPTER 6: OFFICIAL LINE VERSUS BEHAVIOUR OF VOLUNTEERS

The points raised by the volunteers interviewed can be broadly classified into seven different categories. These themes came up consistently during the interviews and illustrate how these volunteers perceive their roles at Meet-the-People Sessions as well as the methods they use to effectively carry out this role. The space for decision-making, in terms of the latitude afforded to them for discretion as well as to take into account the emotions of the residents within the MPS sphere is easily understood through these seven themes. Furthermore, with each point raised, the volunteers also tended to rationalise and explain how the very use of discretion and emotions allows them to better perform their roles when it comes to assisting those most in need, rather than just anyone and everyone who comes to MPS with one request or another. These themes are explored in detail in this and the following chapters.

(A) DISCRETION

The way Meet-the-People Sessions function in Singapore is such that no resident who comes looking for assistance of any kind is turned away. In other words, all residents present will be invited to meet with the writer or proceed straight for welfare assistance when it is their turn. As explained by Respondent 1,

> "Once they walk through the door, even if it's repeated visits, we will write the letter. But whether the appeal is successful or not, it's beyond our control. We just cannot turn anyone away, it's not our policy... I think in a way, it is not for us to judge as we do not have a system in place to do the checks and balances. However, the authority or agency that we refer them to, they do have the checks and balances in

> place to assess the situation. For example, welfare...anyone who comes to us seeking for welfare assistance, we will help. If financial assistance, we will help them. But then they would also have to go through a process, where they have to fill up forms and a social service officer will visit them. That is where the checks and balances are. We cannot really do this at our level."

The fact that no resident gets turned away sometimes serves to only increase the number of residents who turn up at MPS with a variety of requests. According to Respondent 3,

> "Some people know that we don't turn anyone away and will try to help so sometimes they come in with all sorts of funny things they want help with. Sometimes we also know that what they want will not happen, but we just write the letter for them anyway...just a simple letter to the company or agency with their appeal or problem...no need to spend so much time talking to them and finding out more if they already decided what they want and what they want us to do...these kind of people don't want advise and don't want to talk to us, they only want the letter to be sent for them. Ummm but sometimes some of them come just want to talk to someone also, so we need to be a listening ear. So we just listen and give our best advice, but if they really insist we write a

> letter, then we will write, but tell them that the results will not be positive la."

This view was also eloquently put forth by Respondent 5, who shared that

> "The point about MPS is we do not turn anyone away. As long as they belong within the GRC, we will help them, although we may educate them on who their representative within the GRC is, for those who maybe came to the wrong MPS. Anyway, because we do not turn anyone away, we end up writing a whole lot of letters each session, maybe 40 to 50...can you imagine? You multiply this by the number of GRCs and SMCs around...how many appeal cases do agencies have to deal with? It's a wonder how any appeal is successful! Every letter adds to this basket of appeals and there is no differentiation between those who really need help versus those who do not. I mean agencies usually do their own background checks and all, but there may be extenuating circumstances for some residents while perhaps others may just be trying their luck."

In theory therefore, the volunteers are aware that their position does not offer them much to work with other than proceeding with the requests of the residents who come by. As mentioned by Respondent 1 above, the volunteers are not equipped with records or official documents of any kind, which they can use to assess the requests of the residents, so they usually do write letters to various government agencies on their behalf and let them have the necessary

financial or welfare assistance. This view was reiterated by Respondents 3 and 5, as outlined above. These respondents however also made reference to some decision-making on the part of volunteers, as to whether the resident might actually just be at MPS for a listening ear and also how some residents come with cases that are not considered genuine.

In practice nevertheless, volunteers do try to bridge the gap between the official line of helping all residents present and their perception of what needs to be done in order to make MPS a more effective institution in helping especially the residents who urgently need the help. Overall, it is the very awareness of this gap between where they are and where they want to be that spurs volunteers on and makes them carve out a level of latitude for themselves. There are many ways through which they exercise a level of agency and discretion despite a seemingly blanket treatment of residents who come to MPS.

Even as they do exercise their agency and discretion, volunteers tend to stand by the official line that everyone who comes down to MPS for help will receive the help requested. It is thus important to note that it is only against this backdrop that they exercise their discretion, which is usually explained away as necessary in light of the many requests received each week.

This act of rationalising the discretion afforded to the them during MPS is necessary so that the volunteers do not feel like they are treating any resident in a particularly unfair manner, which would then make a mockery out of the fact that MPS was instituted to never turn anyone who was in need of assistance away.

(B) EMOTIONS

Apart from the dissonance in the level of agency and discretion afforded to volunteers in theory and practice, there is another factor that also differs here – the space for emotions. In the ideal bureaucracy outlined by Weber, decision-making is based on using written records that are applied consistently and without prejudice. Apart from that, rules are also considered general and applied even to particular cases (Markoff, 1975). Despite this bureaucratic theoretical ideal of following rules that have been formulated to deal with the various kinds of issues, there remains a space for emotions in the conduct of MPS. Respondent 6 shared that

> "There tends to be a lot of heart-wrenching cases. The ones where a lot of emotions are involved...sometimes the residents cry as they speak to us, sometimes they shout or even threaten us...based on experience, these kinds of cases need to handled with care...especially for writers, we are there to help but we should not take sides...the letters should be objective and agencies should be presented with facts to assess an appeal. As much as possible, we do still try to help everyone, although we cannot commit any results as the individual agencies will make their own assessment. As volunteers though, the first step would be to calm emotional residents down and also empathise with them...if need be, it might be necessary to isolate them so they do not affect the mood and even maybe the expectations of other residents around."

Even as volunteers try their best to remain neutral and keep their personal opinions and emotions on the various issues in check, they have to deal with the emotions of the resident who are present and ensure that these emotions do not sway their judgements in terms of how they present the facts or write the letter altogether. This view was expressed by Respondent 9, who said

> "Most of the residents don't get overly emotional. For those who do end up crying as they relate their issues, they just need the assurance that we will do all we can to help. For those who get aggressive and start shouting, again, I will try to re-assure them first. If this fails, the MP will usually try to reason with them to calm them down then listen to their issues before giving advice or letting them know how we will be helping them. The thing is, a bit of emotion is good sometimes as it shows the volunteers and MP that the problem has really affected the resident and that they do need the help. So it's a fine line between the 2 extremes. Most of the time, it is not difficult to place the residents in the category they belong to though and then act accordingly."

In other words, volunteers do look out for a level of emotions on the part of the residents. To them, showing some emotions is acceptable as it highlights the dire situation the residents find themselves in, but there is a fine line to tread here and an outpouring of emotions could lead to volunteers questioning the authenticity of the needs of the resident in question.

There is a broader subject to be broached here. Emotions are an important component of human communication and relationships. For MPS to be seen as a genuine institution of help, it cannot function stripped bare of all emotions. Nevertheless, while the residents display all the emotions felt, the volunteers do try to show a level of empathy but nothing much else, in accordance to their roles at MPS.

This first theme drawn from the interviews sets the stage for the following themes, which delve into more detail on both discretion and emotions found on the ground at Meet-the-People Sessions in Singapore.

CHAPTER 7: GENUINE CASES VERSUS THOSE THAT ARE NOT

As alluded to in the theme illustrated above, the MPS volunteers do draw distinctions between cases they feel are genuine and those that are not. They draw these distinctions based on a variety of factors, which include the nature of the case faced by the resident, the number of times the resident has met them on the same issue and their relations with the residents outside of MPS. This will then affect how they deal with the cases.

(A) NATURE OF CASE FACED BY RESIDENT

Based on the official premise of MPS to help every resident in need, the kinds of cases that residents come to MPS for are wide-ranging and varied. As a result of this, volunteers classify these cases based on their understanding of the severity of the issues faced. It is only those who face important or hard pressing issues that really get the time of day from the volunteers. The others still get to speak to the writers but the conversations tend to be short and to the point, with no extra effort taken by the volunteers to delve deeper into the issues and source for possible alternative solutions. Respondent 9 shared this in his summary of the kinds of cases heard at MPS.

> "We get our fair share of people coming down and basically just asking for a letter. Some have issues you would not think an MP needs to appeal for them on, such as traffic violations. Then you have those who just simply think a policy should not apply to them because they have other plans for their lives – mostly HDB-, CPF-related issues. In these cases, they just want you to appeal again and again for them and they will provide you with all sorts of reasons why

> they should get their way...For those who have minor or trivial issues, they usually just get straight to the point and I also write a quick letter once I get the gist of it."

Respondent 10 also articulated similar sentiments when he explained how the MPS process differed for those with real issues versus those not facing any major problems.

> "I'm not saying we don't currently help those who are not facing really important issues, but we usually end up just going through the motions with these people. We sit them down and the volunteer would talk to them, just like everyone else, but the amount of time we spend with them would be much less compared to those who face more pressing issues and who really need help. For those who really need help, the MP would sometimes follow up on these outside of MPS even, see who he can contact to ensure assistance is provided. Sort of like going the extra mile, you know."

Based on the interviews conducted, volunteers at the constituency studied view the need for welfare or financial assistance, housing issues and problems with citizenship or Permanent Resident applications as more urgent issues to be resolved. Issues such as traffic offences, complaints about policy and childcare placement, on the other hand, are seen as trivial cases. Traffic offences are treated with low priority simply because the resident is almost always the one at fault and usually even admits to having made a mistake. As

for childcare placement, the high volume of appeals on this at the particular constituency studied made the volunteers desensitised to the issue to such an extent that it has become almost second nature to write the appeal. In a way then, childcare placement appeals are hardly seen in special or extraordinary circumstances. For policy complaints on the other hand, these do not go hand-in-hand with how volunteers see their role. As explained by Respondent 2, "we just come here and help residents. We bring them in, talk to them, write an appeal letter...then of cos the MP will look through the letters and sign them so we can send to other agencies on behalf of the resident". This task-oriented view clearly places engaging a resident on policy issues outside of the MPS sphere, as volunteers aim for efficiency in clearing the letters as soon as possible so they would not need to stay on too late into the night. It would be useful to note here that even though the MPS model was first introduced in Singapore by David Marshall in 1955 so he could meet residents and listen to their issues or suggestions, its purpose has shifted over the years to one that is more task- and results-oriented, in terms of the writing and sending of appeals.

(B) NUMBER OF TIMES THE RESIDENT HAS VISITED ON THE SAME ISSUE

While volunteers try their best to frame the appeal letters written in such a way so as to ensure success, there are many cases where residents return to MPS for re-appeals on the same matter as the outcome was not what they had hoped for. As volunteers get more familiar with the cases, they also feel better able to draw the line between genuine and less than genuine cases. This was brought up by Respondent 6,

> "More often than not, for first-timers, we do not know much about their issue and so the letters of appeal

> tend to be quite general, especially for those without major issues. On the other hand, as people come to MPS more often, we learn more about them and can craft better letters and build a case, especially for those who really desperately need the help. Sometimes it is about how much the residents are willing to tell us as well. We do not reject anyone anyway, cos there are genuine cases usually and it's not so easy to differentiate between the two."

Respondent 5 went further in explaining how those who come back repeatedly to MPS are viewed.

> "As you know, people come back repeatedly on various issues. It's a bit difficult to generalise here. Not all appeals, no matter how well crafted, go through. So sometimes we end up seeing those who really need help coming back again and again. These kind of people I can sympathise with, but I'm stuck too...how many ways can I say the same thing in a letter? So usually I end up writing a very similar letter, asking the agency to re-consider the appeal. Apart from that, you have those who come back often simply because they refuse to accept the rejection, even though their case was not particularly strong in the first place! Again, because I cannot turn them away, I re-write a simple appeal for them. Oh, then you will have those who have gone and seen other MPs or even Ministers already on the issue, but

> because they have not been successful yet, they keep on trying their luck with different MPs and Ministers. This is the worst kind! The funny thing is that sometimes they go down the ranks instead of moving up in the hopes of getting their appeal successful."

In a way then, returning to MPS after an unsuccessful appeal could really be read both ways by the volunteers. As such, they tend to assess the situation in light of any new information made available as well as the extent of the problems raised, before deciding if the case is indeed a genuine one that is worth the added time and effort required to ensure a positive outcome this time around. If the case is judged to not have much merit, the volunteers tend to either re-send the same appeal letter to the agency asking them to reconsider their decision or even advise the resident on alternative ways they can receive help instead, and skip the re-appeal altogether.

(C) RELATIONS OUTSIDE OF MPS

One of the factors that make MPS special is the fact that volunteers are embedded within the community of residents. The people they meet at MPS are thus people they may come into contact with daily – their neighbours and people who work around the estate. This creates a level of familiarity between the volunteers and the residents they assist at MPS. This familiarity can turn out to be beneficial to the residents as some volunteers admit to treating those they already know outside MPS more favourably. Respondent 1 highlighted that it was simply easier to trust that the people you know are not trying to pull a fast one or making use of the system.

> "I think I can help him better because I'd know his background. When we encounter a lot of the

> residents, we know their behaviour, we know how they act...sometimes, we know how sincere they are when they come to us....or how insincere they are. That does help our decision in a way. When we write in the appeal letters, these are things we have to take into consideration."

In a sense then, prior knowledge of someone could serve to also place the volunteer in a better position to truly understand the situation faced by the resident and help them in the best way possible. It nevertheless also puts the volunteers in a better position to decide if the person is being sincere in their appeal or not. On the flipside, various volunteers contended that they would prefer not to assist someone they knew personally simply because they would not want to be blamed if the appeal was unsuccessful. Respondent 10 related a prior case experienced to illustrate this.

> "There was once I came across my secondary school classmate and she had some problems. So I told her, ok, why not you share the issues with me then we will see what we can do from there. We did our best to help her through MPS, but the request did not go through. And until today, she's still a bit sour. I mean I tried to explain to her that sometimes agencies also have their own processes in place as to what they will approve and what they reject. But it's like I've become the person responsible for the rejection to her, which is weird, since I did not make the decision. So since then, I prefer handling residents I don't know personally...and now, every time I attend to cases, I

> will prepare the resident and tell them ‘there are chances that this might fail, so you have to be prepared, but you can come back and we re-appeal’.”

Despite possible reservations, it was clear through the interviews that volunteers tend to be friendlier and more understanding towards residents they know personally and may take the stories related by those they are not familiar with with a pinch of salt. They also believe that the residents they are unfamiliar with would not open up to them easily and volunteers often only get the full picture of issues faced when these residents return a second or third time after a failed appeal.

Upon deciding if the cases faced by residents are genuine or not based on the three tenets covered in this chapter, the volunteer would then deal with the issues faced accordingly. For residents who seemingly face genuine issues, more effort is undertaken to get them the help they need. The range of actions here include lengthy conversations with the writers to ensure the depth of the problem is understood, ensuring the MP speaks to them, putting together a better letter with all the necessary explanations and details, as well as even reaching out to agencies outside of the MPS boundary. For those whom the volunteers believe are not facing genuine issues, the conversations with the writers tend to be short and mostly consist of writers going through the motions in a polite but highly efficient manner, the letters are also short and basic in terms of listing only the issue faced and what the resident wants. These residents sometimes do not even get the opportunity to speak to the MP as the writers simply let them know that they will follow up with the MP and encourage them to leave without speaking to him. Volunteers explain that this differentiation is a necessary process to ensure fair outcomes such that residents who really need help get the assistance they need.

There is thus some judgement being exercised by the volunteers on the validity of the issues faced by the residents. This judgement then guides them in their actions in terms of how they deal with the resident. Despite the public mission of helping all residents, MPS volunteers are compelled to come up with a simple way of managing the many cases they deal with at each session. Using their past experiences to decide which cases are genuine not certainly helps them simplify the actions they should undertake (i.e. the kind of letter to write, whether there is a need to refer the residence to other agencies or groups for help, etc), while still ensuring those most in need of help get the assistance required. This does not mean that no one falls through the cracks though.

CHAPTER 8: AGENCY IN WRITING LETTERS

On top of distinguishing between genuine cases and those that are not, volunteers further wield power over the type and contents of any letter written on behalf of the resident. This arises simply due to the fact that the MPS process at the constituency studied does not let residents who ask for help view the letters written before they are sent out. Instead, these letters are typed by the writers and saved in the system for the editors before being printed for the MP to sign and then sent in sealed envelopes to the agencies in question. In other words, the resident is left out of the entire process and can only control what they share with the writer about their situation. Volunteers, as such, exercise quite a bit of agency in writing the letters in terms of the type of letter written, whether the letter is written in the first place and the actual contents of the letter.

(A) TYPE OF LETTER WRITTEN

Various respondents interviewed used the term ‘basic letter’ for more trivial or unimportant cases, making it apparent that there were non-basic letters reserved for more serious or dire situations. Respondent 2 highlighted the differences between the two kinds of letters,

> “Um basic letter just say the issue and what the resident wants la...just a short letter...but if we are really really trying to help, we explain the issue in detail and show why the resident needs the help.”

This point was also reiterated by Respondent 5, who talked about how residents are essentially classified into a ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’

category, with those considered ‘deserving’ getting more attention and better letters written.

> “The only way to get the residents the help they need is through the letter. The shorter or basic ones tend to be direct and do not offer much to the agencies in their decisions on whether to reject or accept the appeal, while the longer ones tend to take into account everything the resident has related to the volunteers. So actually, on our own, consciously or subconsciously, volunteers do separate the residents we come across during each session into various categories and help them accordingly.”

Respondent 5 went further to rationalise this practice as fair as it protects those who really need assistance.

> “Can you imagine if we treated everyone the same way and put in as much effort in all the letters? Then it would just be about luck in terms of getting appeals through! How would agencies be able to know who really needs the help and who does not? There’s only so much a background check can tell you! We need to be on the side of those who really need help so that they don’t get overlooked at the expense of those who don’t.”

In a nutshell, basic letters are those that are direct and to-the-point. They usually just state the problem the resident is facing and what they would like to be done about it. While I am unable to reproduce actual letters due to

confidentiality issues, the following example illustrates the difference between a basic and more lengthy letter. The underlined portion in the lengthy or non-basic letter is missing from the basic letter, in a bid to keep the letter succinct. This sometimes also happens when the writer feels that there are too many gaps in the story related by the resident and questions the truthfulness of the account.

Basic	Lengthy
Mrs Tan visited me on 10 January 2015. She would like to appeal for childcare placement for her 3 year old daughter, Emily Tan (T15XXXXXJ). She has tried contacting the childcare centres at Blocks 124, 129 and 137 to no avail. Kindly reply to the resident directly and send me a copy for my records.	Mrs Tan visited me on 10 January 2015. She would like to appeal for childcare placement for her 3 year old daughter, Emily Tan (T15XXXXXJ). She has tried contacting the childcare centres at Blocks 124, 129 and 137 to no avail. <u>She was simply placed on the waiting list (sometimes stretching far into the 100s) at all centres. Her parents, who had been Emily's caregivers as both Mrs Tan and her husband are employed, are no longer able to care for Emily since her father suffered a stroke earlier this month. Her inability to secure placement would force her to quit her job and financially burden her family, as they also need to help pay for her father's medical bills.</u> Kindly reply to the resident directly and send me a copy for my records.

The existence of the two types of letters written at MPS thus serves to give those whom the volunteers feel genuinely need the help an added advantage in light of the high volume of appeals regularly sent to the various agencies.

(B) WHETHER THE LETTER IS WRITTEN

The official MPS stance is that no resident gets turned away and anyone who asks for letters to be written on their behalf will get just that. It was clear

from the interviews however, that this was not the case in reality. Since the residents are not privy to the letters written or sent out, volunteers do also make a call on whether or not a letter is written in the first place. According to Respondent 7,

> "Sometimes I don't even write...whether I write or not, he doesn't know anyway...he certainly does not get a copy...I may not even write, especially if it's obvious the person just trying to play with the system or there is nothing new for me to add...sometimes people just cannot accept a rejection of their appeal!"

In other words, the resident does not usually know better and will take it that a letter has been written on their behalf after their conversation with the writers. This practice of not actually writing the letters seems to extend only to people who come down to MPS multiple times on the same issue though.

Respondent 10 also brought this practice up in sharing his thoughts on residents who go to MPS repeatedly on the same issue.

> "I guess it could be due to a number of factors...maybe a system fault in terms of current policies having failed them, this we could bring up to the MP...or maybe it could be really a problem tied to the individual in terms of their stubbornness or insistence on a certain outcome when there are other ways they could resolve their issue. But there have been instances where I have refused to write a letter for the residents as well. This happens when I think

> there is really nothing else we can do, there is nothing new for me to add so we'd just be wasting our time."

The crux of the problem here is that even as first-time residents at MPS are often advised to return if their appeal is unsuccessful so a re-appeal can be made, volunteers are not as welcoming about writing re-appeals for cases they feel are a lost cause. There is thus a seemingly wide gap between the motions they go through in terms of what they say to these residents and how they actually feel about those who return multiple times for re-appeals on the same issue, with no new information or facts to strengthen their case. The space for this form of agency by the volunteer is ultimately created because the MP does not always speak to every resident who walks through the doors and sometimes leaves the writers to handle the resident themselves. There is thus no check to ensure residents who ask for letters get what they want, since the matter is solely between the resident and the writer.

Even with this non-writing of letters, volunteers do try to justify their actions by simply talking about how some residents come to MPS for a listening ear, more than anything else. Respondent 3 explained that

> "Sometimes some of them [the residents] come...just want to talk to someone also, so we need to be a listening ear. So we just listen and give our best advice, but if they really insist we write a letter, then we will say we will write, but doesn't mean we actually write la, since we know the results will not be positive. The best is if they take the advice and say they don't need a letter."

Many of the respondents interviewed believed there to be a segment of residents at MPS who simply need to vent their frustrations or talk their issues over with someone. While the volunteers seemed generally open to being the listening ear needed, they were more accepting to those who took their advice and did not insist on a letter written on their behalf, especially if previous letters had already been sent and received a negative response from the agency in question.

This particular aspect might be atypical of MPS in other constituencies, but happens in this constituency probably because circumstances allow it. The MP at this constituency is relatively new so long-serving grassroots leaders call the shots at MPS. The MP is also not always present from the beginning of each session, while the Branch Chairman and Secretary may be busy handling other duties, allowing the volunteers space for discretion on whether the letter is written.

(C) CONTENTS OF THE LETTER

While it can be easily understood that the contents of the letter would be decided upon by the volunteer, what the writers actually include in the letters sometimes differs from not only what the residents requested they add into it, but also what they tell the residents they have written.

As residents share their issues with the writers, the writers often feel that some facts are unnecessary and would not help the case. They thus make an executive decision, as people who are more familiar with the entire MPS process, on what should be included and what to exclude from the letter they prepare. According to Respondent 10,

> “I try my best to pay attention and hear what they have to say. Then, I’ll let them know objectively, what I can do or how I can help them. I’ll also explain to them the process step by step...it’s ok if they don’t understand or don’t agree with what I mentioned...But if they still hold on to their subjective views or demand that I put certain things in the letter, I will take them in and insert them into the letter as tactfully as possible. But of course there are certain things that I know...if it’s not going to help their case, then it shouldn’t be in the letter la, so I won’t put it in.”

Some respondents expressed that in a bid to increase efficiency, they may sometimes tell residents who insist on them adding certain points to the letter that the points have been added so that they can end the interaction and move on to the next resident in the queue.

Writers also try to tweak the contents of the letter to include reasons and information that will give the resident a better chance at a successful appeal. They do this by either using guiding questions that give residents hints about what the ‘right’ answers are that will help with their cause, or telling the resident right out that their reasoning for the appeal is not good enough and sometimes supplying an alternative reason to include in the appeal written instead. Respondent 5 related the following example to illustrate this point.

> “Sometimes people also craft the letters according to what they know will work, rather than what the resident actually shared. For example someone might say he needs his parents to live near him and ask for

> priority selection in a BTO nearby or something. Then when the volunteer probes further, he finds out that the resident has young kids. And so the volunteer might say 'Do you need your parents to look after your kids?'...cause this will make a stronger case. In the event that the resident says his in-laws actually look after his kids, the volunteer may advise that it might be better to say he needs his parents to look after his kids for any chance of the appeal going through...so sometimes it is also about the likeability of the resident, how he treats the volunteer or even if he already knows one of the volunteers already."

As expressed by Respondent 5, a few factors come into play here. The likeability of the resident, in terms of how friendly and polite he is to the volunteer, and relations with the resident outside of the MPS sphere immediately increase the chances of the writer influencing what is written in the letter so as to achieve a potentially positive outcome. For those who belong to neither of the two categories, the writers are less willing to put themselves on the line and influence what is written in any way, even if they know the points raised by the resident would very likely lead to an unsuccessful appeal.

Apart from that, writers also think about what to include in the letter based on their understanding of the truthfulness of what is being shared by the resident. For those whom they feel are simply making things up as they go along, the writers are less inclined to include their points and most likely to go for what they term as a 'basic letter' instead. Respondent 6 gave the following example.

> "Well, sometimes residents will tell you a long story and the facts do not add up...it's like there is a missing piece of the puzzle and usually when we probe further, we realise that basically this person is just looking for an easy way out of a speeding ticket, or even their HDB loans. What we as volunteers do is, we try to understand the situation and only state the facts in our letters, so this way, we actually differentiate between those who really need help and those who are maybe not so in need through the strength of the letters written...in general, those who really need help have fuller stories and can provide us with exact details and information, compared to those who are simply trying their luck in hopes of getting something to go their way."

It is quite apparent here then that the writers do have a lot of space to manoeuvre when it comes to the contents of the letter written on behalf of the residents. This point was articulated most succinctly by Respondent 7,

> "Some will threaten and say I want you to put this in the letter... or "you mean I need to do this so I can get that?"...but it's up to me to decide what is actually written, not everything the resident says will make sense or should be taken wholesale...writers need to exercise a bit of judgement...whether the person is telling the truth and whether what they ask us to write

is going to help the case...no point challenging the agency when you are asking them for help also!"

Based on the above three sub-points then, it is apparent that writers do also make decisions about what should and should not be included in the letter. More often than not, they rely on their experience with similar issues they have dealt with in the past as a point of reference. Despite the latitude afforded to the writers though, it is essential to note that they are not the ones with the final say about the contents of the letters. This is a privilege enjoyed by the letter editors only. As outlined in an earlier part of the paper, the writers simply draft the letters and save them in the system. These drafts are then retrieved by letter editors, who will vet and amend the letters as they deem fit. Most of the time, these editors shorten letters due to the belief that longer letters would turn agencies off. They thus sometimes end up removing information they feel are unnecessary. This creates a bit of dissonance in the process since the people having the most power over the final letter are not actually the ones who interacted with the resident and thus might not fully understand the situation or the necessity of including certain points raised.

At the particular constituency studied, the letter editors strip most of the contents down to the very basic issues and appeals that even the MP hardly has any feedback on the edited letters and thus simply signs them. During my time as a volunteer at this particular constituency, the MP only asked for edited letters to be revised to include more details highlighted during conversations with the residents about six times. Each time, the information was previously included by the writer but then deleted by the editors. This situation is made worse by the fact that the residents at this constituency do not automatically receive a copy of the letter written. Instead, there is usually some backlog at the

editors end and the letters are all finalised, printed and signed at the end of each session. Residents may request a copy of the letter written on their behalf, but this is usually only given if the case was urgent and they needed to visit the ministry or government agency within the next few days (insufficient time for the letter to be posted).

CHAPTER 9: EXPECTATIONS OF RESIDENTS

The latitude for discretion and agency on the part of the volunteers do not come only from the MPS process and volunteers themselves. Through their interactions with residents at MPS, it is clear that these residents also have certain expectations of them. A case related by Respondent 12 clearly illustrates this point.

> "There was this resident who was trying to get Singapore citizenship....an old man, about 80 plus. His wife and 3 adult sons are all Singaporeans. He was a Singaporean then gave up citizenship for a British passport as he initially thought he wanted to migrate to the UK. He eventually stayed here and ended up stateless...I can't remember all the details, but he basically wanted citizenship because his medical costs was too high. He didn't get any subsidies since he was not a Singaporean or PR, and with all the medical issues that come with old age, his family was having difficulties coming up with the finances needed. So although he highlighted this was the issue, he told me to use my discretion on what should be brought up in the letter. You see, he had other things going for him too. He lived in Singapore all his life and had some documentary proof for this in terms of educational certificates and even newspaper clippings that featured him. Residents expect us volunteers to know best what should be included and what should be left out from the letters. So sometimes

they tell us the whole story, but want us to really think about what we should write."

Residents expect that since volunteers write many appeal letters on behalf of the residents, they have a better idea of what kinds of arguments and information will help them further their cause. In this way, residents also show that they see volunteers as experts in this field. Many of them thus expect the volunteers to use a bit of judgement to evaluate which pieces of information they provide would best ensure their appeal is successful. This is something that happens more so for residents who choose to share everything and be as truthful as possible about their situation to the volunteers. These kinds of residents tend to be the ones who hope that in being as frank as possible, the volunteers will empathise with them and try their best to help them in any way they can.

CHAPTER 10: EMOTIONS DURING MEET-THE-PEOPLE SESSIONS

Meet-the-People Sessions tend to be a highly-charged and emotional affair as many residents come in desperate need of help and some feel they have not been treated fairly or given enough of a chance by the various government agencies they need help with. As highlighted by Respondent 3,

> "Some of them when they come they are very upset or angry, so sometimes you need to acknowledge that and give them a bit more eye contact, show them that you understand the problem and want to help them as much as possible so that they feel that you are actually listening to them, and really sincerely listening to them...and of cos some of the small things that we can do when we are listening can help also, like nodding our head to show that we are paying attention, asking the right questions."

Volunteers thus appreciate the position the residents find themselves in and try their best to empathise with them, through what Hodder (2011) termed "emotional and technical professionalism". This essentially means that volunteers try to connect with residents on a higher level, as regular people with worries and fears, instead of just as an MPS writer and resident. This goes a long way towards shifting the way residents interact with the government at large as well, as they come to expect being heard and listened to before a decision is made on their case, even if unsuccessful. This behaviour is very much in line with research done by Arlie Hochschild on flight attendants. She postulated that flight attendants had to behave a certain way as they completed the package in the kind of service airlines were selling to passengers –

"Whatever happens, you're supposed to say, 'I know just how you feel'...such expressions of empathy are useful in convincing passengers that they have misplaced the blame and misaimed their anger" (Hochschild, 2012:111).

Even as they try to connect with the residents though, volunteers make a concerted effort to remain objective in dealing with the cases brought forward. They try their best not to let the outpouring of emotions by the resident affect their role as a writer at MPS. According to Respondent 2,

> "You need to exercise a bit of control as a volunteer. Let the resident talk, no point stopping them, otherwise they will get even more angry. After they finish then you explain to them your position...must also let them know that you are just a volunteer, not from any agency or something. Usually slowly, they will accept you...then they will share the real problem...they need to know that no matter what, we will write for them...although percentage of successful cases can be quite low, we will still try...some volunteers too much, they will say 'You listen to me...', they don't let the person talk...so the person even more angry. Whether they cry or shout or throw tantrums, we need to maintain our cool and know what we're there for. At the end of the day, we need to write a factual letter to help the resident, whether we like them or not."

The behaviour of the volunteers then is akin to wearing a mask that hides their personal opinions and beliefs as they deal with the various issues each

resident brings forward. Instead, they all simply try to project a professional and empathetic image as they interact with these residents. According to Hochschild, this is a form of deep-acting, which involves "deceiving oneself as much as deceiving others" as "in jobs that require dealing with the public, employers are wise to want workers to be sincere, to go well beyond the smile that's 'just painted on'" (2012:33).

Most often, true feelings and opinions of the volunteers are only shared during the debrief sessions at the end of each MPS. During these sessions, volunteers not only share some of the peculiar cases they came across during the MPS that day, but also evaluate these cases in terms of whether the resident was asking for the impossible or trying to make use of the appeals system available or even if they did not deserve the help they were asking for due to a variety of factors. In a way, MPS does cater to the emotions of the residents and allows them to show how the particular situations they find themselves in affect them negatively. While volunteers try not to let these emotions guide them in their letters, they do empathise with the residents and usually accept that some level of emotion on their part shows that they must be at the end of their rope and in desperate need of help, thus making it seem like they were facing genuine issues.

In explaining their behaviour, volunteers defer to the fact that MPS is ultimately a political tool to garner support and votes from the residents and thus a certain behaviour and decorum is expected of them. In the words of Respondent 10,

> "At the end of the day, as a political party, it is all about political costs and benefits. The fact that we have MPS is because there is really no other way for

> residents to vent their anger or for the party to know what's going on in the different constituencies. This is the closest that we are actually to the ground...with that, the party knows what the issues are, what they should and should not do, and so on. You know, every month, the Branch Secretary will generate a report on the classification of cases we have dealt with at MPS...how many housing, how many childcare, and so on...this is submitted to the HQ. So I think that even though we are trying to help residents, our main objective behind this is to help the party, to understand what's happening on the ground as well as to continue to gain more political votes. So ya, MPS in a way, is to create a mirage for the residents...that the party is helping them, but actually we are helping ourselves more."

It is clearly understood by volunteers then that while MPS may outwardly function to help residents in communicating their needs and requests with government agencies, it has a latent function in keeping the party in power through the very act of listening to residents and acting on their behalf. It is hoped that this will help build a mass of support for the MP in charge of the constituency and by extension, the political party in control of the area as well. In this way, MPS could very well be classified under the umbrella term of "gestural politics" (Lee, 2005). This means that while the apparatus for political engagement and communication is made available through MPS, its function is largely gestural in the sense that it does not actually do much for the resident in terms of meeting their needs and wants. The apparatus nevertheless

survives simply because of the political utility it brings in terms of support and votes needed.

CHAPTER 11: ROUTINISATION OF THE MPS PROCESS

Even as problems the residents come to MPS with are wide-ranging and their needs different from each other, they can all be certain of how the MPS process is and what they can expect out of it. From queuing up outside the MPS venue to the doors opening at 8pm, followed by registration and waiting for their number to be called so they can speak to a writer and get their appeal letter sent to the agency in question, the process is consistent and applies to everyone the same way. This consistency serves as a marker of fairness and equality in terms of how residents are treated at MPS.

Apart from that, expected behaviours at MPS are also taught and routinised in a way. It is not unusual for the mainstream media in Singapore to highlight cases where residents have behaved in an unbecoming manner at MPS, leading to various arrests and jail sentences. In 2006 for example, a former taxi driver, Koo Tong Huat, was arrested for punching his MP in the face at the Meet-the-People Session. The MP, Seng Han Thong ended up with minor lip injuries. Mr Koo needed assistance in recovering his taxi license and was incensed as he felt he was not being assisted accordingly (The Straits Times, 26 July 2006). In another incident reported, a relief taxi driver, Teo Kian Seng, was charged for threatening an MP with physical violence during his Meet-the-People Session (The Straits Times, 5 June 2010). All these reports serve to reiterate to residents the acceptable and unacceptable behaviours at MPS. They thus also play a role in routinising the expected behaviour from residents, even as it is understood that some of them do face incredibly difficult situations.

The routinisation of MPS also occurs at the volunteer level as they try to categorise the residents into different groups based on the problems they face,

their behaviour and explanations provided regarding their requests as well as their overall expectations out of MPS. This categorical distinction is something the volunteers already have at the back of their minds through their experience dealing with various cases and they draw on it to help them deal with the resident at hand. Even as each resident who comes forward asks for special considerations and tries to show how their situation is truly unique, volunteers usually do not treat them as such and have somewhat set ways of behaving based on how they classify the resident in their minds. This point is linked to one raised by Merz (2010:13), who argued that "Bureaucratic organisations...forces administrative tasks to be done in a sequence of routines like machines in the industrial production. This leads to a tendency of excessive control of the official and the elimination of all aspects of human life, mechanisation and routine inhibit the usage of cognitive capabilities and eliminate the ability of spontaneous acting". Nevertheless there is a difference to be drawn out here. While Merz is referring to the iron cage of rationality in terms of how bureaucrats defer to the official discourse and classification in carrying out their work and thus lose the human touch, volunteers at MPS tend to rely more on their experience to classify the residents they come into contact with so as to be better able to perform their duties. Respondent 9 shared some tenets of classifying residents.

> "We [The volunteers] end up having to deal with the good and bad, the resident whom we should really help and those who are just taking us for a ride...Other than missing pieces of information in their story or a very well-rehearsed story, those taking us for a ride tend to be very measured in the way they talk and don't seem to really feel anything about their issues.

> It's like they are detached in a way. And so it's easy to see they are just trying their luck. I mean of cos I don't expect people to get too emotional like crying and all that, but these people just seem like they have nothing to lose by getting an MP to appeal on their behalf. Not like those who have exhausted all alternatives and are now in desperate need of help. These people tend to be a bit more flustered, passionate about their issues and almost always try to connect with the volunteers on a more emotional basis, like they need our empathy."

The volunteers therefore make distinctions about the people who come forward based on their preset notions of how someone who really needed help would behave. They apply these notions to the residents they meet then act accordingly in writing the letter, be it a basic or a lengthier and more detailed one. It is interesting to note here that some level of emotion is seen in a positive light as it helps bring across both the severity of the situation, and the desperation felt by the resident.

The mental classification by volunteers of the residents they deal with parallels a point made by Lipsky (2010: xi), that "street-level workers lacked the time, information, or other resources necessary to respond properly to the individual case. Instead, street-level bureaucrats manage their difficult jobs by developing routines of practice and psychologically simplifying their clientele and environment in ways that strongly influence the outcomes of their efforts...On the one hand, the work is often highly scripted to achieve policy objectives...On the other hand, the work requires improvisation and responsiveness to the individual case". While the actual roles and functions of

street-level bureaucrats, such as policemen and government customer service officers, differ from that of an MPS volunteer, they are similar in the sense that the volunteers do have to deal face-to-face with the residents and need to interact with and respond to them immediately. This thus makes it imperative that MPS volunteers act in a similar fashion to street-level bureaucrats, by drawing on patterns they are already familiar with.

The volunteers can also be seen as operating in a similar pattern to that of juvenile office interviewers. In his study on juvenile delinquency, Aaron Cicourel described the juvenile officer interview as "oriented by a variety of hunches, theories, rules of thumb, general procedures, and on the spot strategies for dealing with different juvenile suspects. The officer's past experience and the information available prior to the interview, lead him to make quick evaluations of his client...The interrogation, therefore, is highly structured...information revealed by the juvenile is evaluated quickly in terms of a set of categories which the officer invokes by means of questions posed" (Cicourel, 1968:115). The way these interviews are conducted and the thought processes that go through the minds of the interviewers seem to parallel exactly that of the volunteers at MPS. These volunteers do already have ready classifications and appropriate actions that should be taken based on past experience and are also privy to the previous times the resident has been at MPS since these are all stored in the system. They thus draw on these to interact with the resident, and this interaction will confirm which category the resident belongs to in their minds.

The conduct of the volunteers thus flows directly from the category they place the residents in. This classification is not one that has been outlined by those in power and passed to the volunteers, but one that the volunteers

individually come up with as they meet more and more residents in their capacity as an MPS volunteer.

CHAPTER 12: GRASSROOTS INVOLVEMENT VERSUS NOT

As pointed out in the background to the constituency above, most of the MPS volunteers at the area studied are also involved in grassroots activities and ended up being MPS volunteers as a result of peer pressure or simply because they felt that being just a grassroots volunteer alone did not allow them to help residents as much as they wanted to. The motivations for those who were solely MPS volunteers were however quite different, as they sought to pursue a worthwhile and meaningful cause in their free time.

The difference in motivational factors also results in different views towards their roles at MPS and the residents they were helping in the long run. Volunteers involved in grassroots activities, with its various perks and benefits, tend to see their role at MPS as a sideline activity to their grassroots role. In other words, being an MPS volunteer basically allowed them more political access and space to help residents, most of whom they were already familiar with. These volunteers tended to be more task-oriented and slightly more alienated from the process as they felt writing appeal letters on behalf of the residents was a good enough way to assist them. They also did not mind that many people might be making use of the system or brought up issues that perhaps were not as serious or important, since they felt people simply needed a listening ear at times.

For volunteers who were not involved in grassroots activities and so only involved in MPS however, they tended to get easily jaded with this situation. As people whose motivation in volunteering was meaningful work, they soon realise that the number of residents who come forward with trivial issues is too high for them to reconcile their role as one that truly set out to help residents and change their lives for the better. The help given was thus not seen as grand

or important enough to be classified as a meaningful way to spend their time. Nevertheless, they tend to be the ones most advocating help for those they felt genuinely needed some form of assistance in the issues faced.

Those who solely volunteered for MPS generally also saw the entire MPS process and the fact that letters were written for everyone who came down as ineffective and inefficient in the long run since it was clear that some people needed more help than others. As Respondent 4 lamented,

> "Actually it's not effective per se to write letters for all, we should only write for those who really need help rather than everyone. I mean, when we write for everyone, who are we really helping? The agencies will be flooded with letters so they end up just sending template replies or rejections, without really paying attention to the issue being outlined in the letter. So, I'd say that basically the MP and the political party are the ones who benefit...MPS is good for politics, it shows the residents that the politicians want to help them wherever possible...also shows that the MPs are concerned about the wellbeing of the residents."

MPS volunteers who are not involved in grassroots activities do not have a larger point of reference from which to understand their role as a volunteer and thus tend to feel more dissatisfied compared to those who are also grassroots volunteers. Due to their embedded nature in the community at large and how their role at MPS is linked to their role as grassroots leaders, MPS volunteers who are also involved in grassroots activities easily accept the fact

that the point of MPS is to provide help to all who walk through the doors, or at least seem to provide the help required. They understand that MPS is ultimately more a tool to garner political support than anything else as not only do the residents get to meet the MP who represents their interests in parliament thus creating a sense of familiarity with him, but the decisions on whether appeals are successful or not are also never made at the MPS level. In a sense then, they get that the lack of any official decision-making at MPS translates to mean MPS is merely a political vehicle to amass support rather than anything else.

This dualism between advocacy and alienation was also examined by Lipsky, in his study of street-level bureaucrats. He asserted that "The helping orientation of street-level bureaucrats is incompatible with their need to judge and control clients for bureaucratic purposes" (2010:73). As the only motivational factor for those who solely volunteer for MPS is this advocacy role in terms of helping residents, they end up finding this at odds with the need to essentially "judge and control" the residents who come to MPS. Those who are also grassroots volunteers, on the other hand, fare better as their role at MPS is largely an extension of their grassroots role and so they do not use MPS to measure their effectiveness as a volunteer in assisting the residents. For the MPS volunteers by extension, those who were not involved in grassroots activities tended to take their agency and discretion seriously and usually went all out to help residents they felt faced genuine issues that they would otherwise not be able to resolve themselves.

For volunteers also involved in grassroots activities however, they accepted the fact that MPS offered them some level of latitude and exercised their agency within the bounds available, although they were more likely to

consider much fewer cases as genuine issues that they needed to go the extra mile for.

CHAPTER 13: UNDERSTANDING MPS IN SINGAPORE

As a result of the themes uncovered from the interviews with the respondents, Meet-the-People Sessions in Singapore can be understood in a new light. The space for decision-making, discretion and emotions during the sessions cannot be denied and should be acknowledged as part and parcel of how Meet-the-People Sessions are carried out. Nevertheless, the themes discussed above also point towards a confluence of other factors that need to be taken into account for us to have a holistic view and appreciation of the MPS as an institution of the bureaucracy.

I. THE FUNCTION OF MPS

As outlined in the Introduction segment of this paper, the function of Meet-the-People Sessions, when first started by David Marshall, was essentially one of political engagement. Marshall wanted residents to hold the party, and by extension the government, accountable for the laws and policies it put in place. He wanted to create a safe space where residents could meet the very people they put in power and share their thoughts and feedback on issues of local and national concern. Marshall went as far as to say that he wanted to receive advice from the residents (Tan, 2008).

Based on the interviews with the respondents and the sessions observed however, it is clear that this view of MPS is no longer held on to by those in authority or the residents under their care. Instead, the main reason MPS exists today seems to be for appeal letters to be written to government agencies on behalf of residents. At least 85% of residents who go down to MPS are not interested in engaging the government on issues but simply want their issues resolved. Most of them come armed with various letters and other documentation to show how their own appeals to government agencies had failed and so they urgently needed the MP to step in.

The main issue here is that MPS has, since then, become somewhat of an appeal-letter churning institution and many who go down only have that particular aim. The very act of writing the letter has become an end itself in the minds of some volunteers. These volunteers have become so task-oriented as the letters are seen to provide tangible proof that the party and the government are interested in assisting residents. In a sense then, the very problems faced by residents have been individualised to such an extent that almost everyone who comes down to MPS only hope to get their issues resolved. Not many actually want to give their ideas, opinions and feedback on policies or laws. The fact that the volunteers also tend to concentrate on writing the letters and prefer to get straight to the point on this so as to increase efficiency, rather than spend too much time talking to residents on issues they hold close to their hearts, only serves to reiterate this.

The entire process thus reinforces the selfishness of people as residents merely come down to MPS for their own issues and have a set of expectations they want the volunteers and MP to meet. They then leave knowing that something has been done for them. The letter also becomes more than just a piece of paper, it is a symbolic gesture that the MP cares about issues faced by residents under his purview and will do anything to help. The fact that replies on appeals from agencies are sent directly to residents and copied to the MP however, does also reinforce the symbolism of the appeal letter. More often than not, the MP does not do anything to follow up with agencies when appeals or requests are unsuccessful. All replies copied to the MP are sorted and filed, but no further action is taken. The resident would have to come down to MPS again if they wish for more to be done for them in light of an unsuccessful appeal.

As a symbolic gesture, the writing of appeal letters definitely wins the MP and the political party some support and gratitude from the residents. It is essential to note however, that very few people come back to thank the MP for successful appeals. Instead, the writing and sending of letters to agencies on behalf of the residents has become something the residents expect of the very person they voted for. It is clear then that the function of MPS has evolved since its inception.

The efficacy of writing appeal letters at MPS itself was even questioned by the late Mr Lee Kuan Yew, when he was Prime Minister of Singapore. The late Mr J. B. Jeyaretnam, an opposition member in Parliament, motioned for "directing all ministries that where they reject any application from a citizen or make any decision which impinges on the rights of the citizens, they should give detailed reasons for their rejection" (*Singapore Monitor,* 4 December 1982)**.**The late Mr Lee's response was that more often than not, residents did not come forward because they did not understand the policy, but either because they did not want a particular policy to be applied to them or because they wanted a more favourable standing for a particular service. The late Mr Lee went further to stress that "The Government's duty is to patiently but firmly convince such people that because the rules are not bent for anyone, therefore all are better off...there is no failure in communication. The failure is in human refusal to accept that they cannot be exceptions to the rule" (*Singapore Monitor,* 4 December 1982). The signal from the top ruling party leader at that time was thus that the writing of appeal letters during MPS was very much a paper exercise as all laws and rules should be applied evenly and fairly to every citizen, since they were already well-thought through in the first place.

Nevertheless, it is possible to understand why MPS today has been watered down to the writing of appeal letters. In recent times, avenues for public feedback on policies have increased exponentially. There is a feedback unit, REACH, where members of the public can call or write in to voice their grievances and get the necessary assistance. Apart from that, the email addresses for most MPs and Ministers are public and many residents do email them directly on various issues as well. Even social media is relevant here, as most political parties as well as elected and non-elected MPs have Facebook pages that people use to voice their opinions on policies or bring up complaints regarding constituency or national issues. While REACH and emails are usually interactive channels, not all MPs reply to Facebook messages and posts on their walls though, so perhaps it can be seen as a somewhat less effective channel. The fact that MPS is more for the writing of appeal letters now can then also be seen as an evolution of the channel in light of the changing landscape for political engagement.

II. THE SPACE FOR EMOTIONS IN THE BUREAUCRACY

Over the years, Singapore has gotten a plethora of awards and recognition as being first for a variety of things, from our airport to our communication and transportation networks. A Gallup poll in 2012 nevertheless also found that "Singaporeans are the least likely in the world to report experiencing emotions of any kind on a daily basis. The 36% who report feeling either positive or negative emotions is the lowest in the world...Gallup measures daily emotions in more than 150 countries and areas by asking residents whether they experienced five positive and five negative emotions a lot the previous day." (Gallup, 2012). Singaporeans thus came across as an unfeeling bunch of productive people based on the survey results. This of

course spelt good news for the ideal-type bureaucracy envisioned by Weber, where people should not be led by emotions.

Based on Weber's description of the ideal bureaucracy, emotions are not something to be sought after in running a country, since emotions could be volatile and lead to an inconsistent application of laws and policies. This in turn would cause unnecessary confusion in the populace and certainly create a level of discontentment as well. Thus, predictability became a key tenet of the ideal bureaucracy espoused by Weber. As discussed in an earlier part of the paper though, the professional distance from citizens created by this ideal-type bureaucracy could lead to an iron cage of rationality, where rationality becomes the end rather than the means, leading to host of many other issues, such as laws and policies that do not really take into account the lived experiences and conditions of the populace.

There is thus obviously a very fine line between allowing some form of emotion into policymaking and for the bureaucracy to become too emotional. In Singapore's bureaucracy, it can largely be said that emotions are left out of policymaking. Rules and laws are put in place after the practical consequences in terms of how they would affect things like productivity and social cohesion are taken into account. This makes the laws and policies far removed from the citizens at large, who are sometimes negatively affected by them and cannot appreciate how it may be beneficial to the nation as a whole. Again, this is an individual response to a national issue, on the part of the citizens. This is thus where Meet-the-People Sessions come into place.

MPS is where emotions of the residents are given free reign and they can share their burdens and difficulties experienced as a result of various rules or policies in place. In a way, MPS brings the policies formulated without heart

down to a level where residents feel that there is some heart involved in terms of how they are being listened to and cared for. It is a humanising of the bureaucracy at the lowest level, but with political support to be gained again.

Emotional human connections are made between the resident and the writers as well as MPs at MPS. Residents are allowed to share their problems and feelings, expecting some level of empathy and understanding from the writers. MPS volunteers present thus have to manage these situations where emotions are not only shown by the residents, but also required of the volunteers, as compassion and empathy become of paramount importance. Volunteers have to be able to handle the residents without alienating or patronising them. Additionally, they also have to translate the emotions of the residents at MPS to a form that bureaucrats will understand through the letters. While the writers try their best to translate these emotions into the drafting of the letters, this aspect is reduced further down the line by the letter editors and sometimes the MP as well. Nevertheless, the emotions on display on the part of the residents and the response of the writers make MPS a bureaucratic process that is not entirely devoid of emotion. To the residents, someone is listening to them and empathising with their needs or worries. This is therefore certainly one of the only avenues through which emotions find its way into Singapore's bureaucratic structure.

It has to be acknowledged however, that this allowance for emotions really begins and ends when the constituent is speaking to the MPS volunteer. In reality, the volunteers are mostly not privy to the results of the appeals sent through and thus do not follow-up on the issues brought up. As such, the level of heart involved at MPS is largely superficial and hardly permeates through to the everyday lives of these residents in dealing with the bureaucracy, even if it is a follow-up from the issues brought up at MPS.

III. DIVISION OF LABOUR WITHIN THE MPS STRUCTURE

It was brought up earlier in the paper that there is a significant division of labour that takes place at MPS. Roles played by the volunteers include registration personnel, writers, editors, welfare personnel and so on. There is a level of specialisation for each role, based on the function and demands of the role. While the duties of those at the registration and welfare counters as well as the floaters who call out numbers or just mingle with residents are unproblematic, there seems to be a bit of a gap between the writers and editors.

To reiterate, the writers are the ones who meet and interact with the residents. Residents usually pour their hearts out to the writers in the hope that the writers will truly understand the difficulties they face and help send a strong letter on their behalf to the government agency in question. In drafting the letters, writers do make judgements about the residents that come forward, along with their cases and issues brought up. They do this so as to be able to separate those they feel are genuine from those they believe are not. They then do up the letters accordingly, with more care and effort being put into the letters for those they think need more assistance. This is where the aforementioned differentiation between basic and lengthier letters comes into play.

Editors, on the other hand, have the sole purpose of ensuring any letter sent out would make sense to the government agencies receiving them. They do not actually meet the residents or spend any time with them. Instead, they go through the letters drafted by the writers and saved into the system to streamline them and ensure a certain template or format is consistently applied. In doing this, the emotions and personal connections shared between the writers and residents during the interview and writing process may not find its

way into the final letter at the end of the day. As editors keep in mind the fact that their audience are bureaucrats in the various government agencies, letters become impersonal and generic as most semblances of empathy are removed so as to be aligned with the bureaucratic language. Many lengthy letters get transformed into basic letters when edited and then sent out to agencies.

This thus reduces the effectiveness of any letter drafted by the volunteers. The main issue here is that the two groups of volunteers essentially have two different sets of people in mind when they prepare the letters. While writers meet the residents and try their best to include not only information they feel would help their cause, but also put words to the thoughts and emotions of these residents, editors are removed from the process and concentrate on keeping the letters succinct and concise. Therefore, as the letter progresses from the writers to the editors, the emotion involved gets lost in translation and all the humanism ends up being bureaucratised, sort of like coming full circle.

The removal of emotions and other subjective elements is akin to removing the very content that could possibly help the residents in furthering their cause, as they appeal to bureaucrats on a basic human level of need. A lot of the compassion and emotion involved in the interaction between the writers or the MP and the residents gets diluted in the process. This contributes to the irrationality of MPS. The fact that the residents do connect with the MP and writers however, often means that the agency and ministries are seen as the people who did not grant these residents what they asked for when their appeals are rejected. In a sense then, the blame does not necessarily fall on the MPs or the volunteers as they are seen as the compassionate and understanding bunch of people who are truly trying to help the residents. Most residents do not realise (since they are not privy to the letters sent out) that not all the

compassion and empathy displayed gets translated into the appeal sent at the end of the day. This is perhaps one of the reasons why MPS continues to draw large crowds each week.

IV. POWER AND MPS

Through the interviews, it would seem that the MPS volunteers are rather powerful vis-a-vis the constituents who find themselves trying to seek help through the MPS channel. This power is somewhat ineffective though, as the volunteers themselves are, more often than not, unaware of the outcomes of the appeals they have helped put through. There is thus hardly any intrinsic satisfaction for these volunteers and some end up feeling jaded or alienated. While this arrangement may perhaps have been put in place as it is simply too draining for volunteers to be involved in each case the whole way, it also shows us the ultimate bigger picture, that volunteers themselves do not have as much power as it may seem at first.

Agencies often carbon copy their replies on MPS letters to the MP who sent them, but these are often sorted and filed by the administrative officer at the MPS. It would seem then that the act of being available to help residents in need is given priority over whether or not help was actually given or if these residents got what they wanted out of the process.

The residents are therefore at the lowest end of this chain of power, which ultimately ends with the MP. Within the group of MPS volunteers, there are also different rungs, with those holding positions within the party branch and grassroots wielding more power than those who are mere volunteers. Those with positions are often also more aware of happenings within the constituency and sometimes already know background stories to the cases that are brought up at the MPS. The power to make decisions at MPS is thus also

related to roles played outside of MPS in terms of whether these volunteers are involved in grassroots activities and hold positions there.

V. FROM MPS TO GOVERNMENT-POPULATION RELATIONS GENERAL

The evolution of Meet-the-People Sessions into something that is more task-oriented in terms of producing appeal letters on behalf of residents can also be extended to raise some points on the relationship between the Singapore government and the population in general.

The shift towards something more results-oriented and tangible clearly shows a certain sense of the MP and party returning the favour of having voted for them to the residents. This point is reiterated by the fact that help is usually only offered to residents living within the constituency and within the Group Representation Constituency (GRC), at best. The MP and the party want to show these residents that there are benefits in voting for them, and these include the fact that at the end of the day, they do care for the residents under their charge and take an interest in the issues and problems they face.

The interesting thing to note here would be that the ordinary citizen is mostly unlikely to be involved in major policy decisions in any significant way, and most accept this as a way of life. Many Singaporeans are more than willing to let the government rule and will only come forward when they face issues they cannot resolve by themselves. As put forth by Chua (2002:205), "Singaporeans are well aware of the interventionist character of the PAP government, while appreciative of its technical and bureaucratic efficacy in improving their material life. The trade-off for the majority is: improved material life for some losses in civil and political liberties". While there have been various socio-political developments in Singapore since this was written, such as an increasing number of dialogues and feedback sessions with residents

on political issues, much remains the same. This again only goes to show an individualised perspective on problems faced, as citizens only engage the government when they feel it is necessary for them to do so on a personal level.

Apart from that, MPS reiterates the residents or constituents as goal-oriented beings who indulge in rational choice to bring about the outcomes they would like. Many make use of the MPS platform as it is readily available and allows them to hold someone accountable for resolving issues they face. It is well-known to everyone involved that the residents may not ultimately achieve their goal or resolve their problem, but the way MPS is run, this is secondary. The outcomes are not as important as the mere fact that the MP is available to his residents. Some may conceive of this as a facade, of the party positioning itself as wanting to help but not actually doing anything. The important point to acknowledge here is that MPS is but one channel of assistance available, and sometimes, those with really genuine cases and in desperate need of help, tend to have their problems resolved outside of the bounds of the MPS. Sometimes it takes more than an appeal letter to a government agency, sometimes it really takes a village to help a resident resolve his issues. It can be said that many of the issues or problems shared at MPS are considered trivial and not dire in this sense, as further action is unlikely to be taken.

Nevertheless, the power differential between the various groups of people pointed out previously also alludes to the fact that some form of patronage system exists when it comes to the workings of the MPS in Singapore. Patronage has long been highlighted as a method through which politicians both increase as well as hold on to political support. Green (2011:424) postulated that “leaders in competitive democracies with a free press should be more likely to employ easily visible types of patronage...as

they seek to win their next election, while leaders in states without competitive elections and a free media would more likely rely upon less visible or permanent types of patronage". As elections in Singapore become increasingly competitive, the ability of the MP and volunteers to connect with residents and where possible, give them what they want, is important in retaining political power. The manifest function of MPS is to help residents with issues they face, through some level of discretion and decision-making on the part of the volunteers and MP. The latent function, however, shows us that in spite of the agency and latitude offered to volunteers, it is still very much a system that rewards based on loyalty and commitment to the political party. This lies simply in the fact that MPS is still ultimately a political organisation, with affiliations to the party the MP is from. In this sense, it is understandable that volunteers who hold grassroots positions have more power or say in not only how residents are dealt with, but which cases deserve more attention. Within the residents too, there are different treatments, with those who either have presumably genuine issues or those who know the volunteers personally tending to do better in getting what they want.

CHAPTER 14: CONCLUSION

This research was an exploratory study on decision-making at Meet-the-People Sessions in Singapore. Having been a volunteer before even thinking about doing this paper, I took the space for decision-making on the ground during MPS as a given. This was more so because of what I had observed and experienced as a volunteer and despite the official bureaucratic ideal of rules and laws being applied consistently and without any discretion or emotions.

Based on my observations and interviews, it can be argued that decision-making is necessitated by the way MPS is carried out. Writing similar letters for every single resident would simply be counter-productive and impractical. It would also never bring the MP and the party the political support it hoped to gain through MPS. The agency and discretion used in (a) deciding if cases brought forward were genuine and thus deserving or not, and (b) the writing of letters in terms of the type of letter written, the contents to include and whether the letter is written in the first place all serve to ensure MPS functions better as an institution of assistance to residents most in need of help in their dealings with the various government agencies. The fact that residents themselves expect that volunteers use their experience to ensure the letter written has the best chance of success only serves to drive home this point. Decision-making, in terms of the agency and discretion afforded to volunteers goes a long way towards fulfilling the MP's obligations to the residents in terms of resolving the issues they face. Without this space for agency and discretion, the success rate for the letters would most probably be much lower than it is today. This is definitely where the ability of volunteers to categorise residents at MPS comes in handy as well.

Emotions, on the other hand, while not considered an important factor in policymaking, needs a channel for expression as well. Leaving emotions out entirely in the relationship between the government and its citizens would create a hostile and

bitter environment, where the power distance between those who rule and the ones being ruled is insurmountable. MPS has proven to be the avenue where emotions from residents are welcome, albeit to a certain extent. The showing of emotions on the part of the resident and the empathy and compassion expected of the volunteers come together to cement a relationship that transcends that of government and resident. Instead, they meet on a level playing field, as people with needs and fears. This helps the resident connect with the government and somewhat bridges the space created by their lack of involvement in policymaking.

Thus, this research shows that even though MPS takes place within a broader bureaucratic structure, the space afforded to the MP and volunteers involved in deciding not only how to deal with each constituent but also the extent of help each constituent should receive as well as the emotional connection built, all come together to make MPS successful (or seemingly successful) as an institution for help. The flexibility on the ground and the personal touch offered ensure that MPS works in terms of achieving it's objectives of both (a) helping residents, especially those seen as most deserving, and (b) garnering political support for the MP and political party.

In terms of helping residents most in need, it is not uncommon for stories of how residents in dire need of help get the support required to be carried in both the mainstream media as well as some Facebook and blog posts. Word-of-mouth is also useful here as some who receive help do tell friends about how they resolved their issues, as they encourage them to also speak to their MP at MPS on their issues. In the constituency studied, there were also cases of residents who received help and then joined MPS as a volunteer so they would be able to help others in a similar way. The media coverage and the fact that MPs tend to highlight how holding MPS makes them more attuned to the issues plaguing their constituencies help in garnering political support for the political party as well. It should be noted that after the General Elections in 2015, the constituency studied saw one of the highest numbers of

residents seeking help at MPS the following Monday. Most residents use this platform to remind the MP that they voted for them and so the MP and volunteers should do their best to assist them in any way possible.

What this research also points to, is the need to acknowledge that there is space for decision-making, discretion and emotions in the practice of policy. In his study on street-level bureaucrats, Lipsky (2010:84) contended that

> "The routines, simplifications, and low-level decision-making environments of street-level bureaucracies are political. Street-level bureaucrats...determine the allocation of particular goods and services in the society, utilizing positions of public authority...some people are aided, some are harmed, by the dominant pattern of decision-making. If the dominant patterns of decision-making are characterized by routinisation and simplification, then the structure of these patterns must be analyzed to determine who gets what, when, and how from this sector of government".

By extension, an acceptance of the fact that decision-making, discretion and emotions exist would allow us to better understand how they affect the MPS appeal process and outcomes for the residents, and thus evaluate their usefulness in this aspect as well. It is only through this that possible alternative methods of ensuring residents get the help they need can be explored. It would not serve us well to go on pretending that everything is cast in stone and that no manoeuvring space exists at all in the application of policy, since it is precisely this space that shows residents and the population at large just how the government tries to give them what they want, despite the laws and policies already in place.

As this research was exploratory and there have not been many studies on Meet-the-People Sessions in Singapore, there is definitely more that can and should be done to further understand this topic. A good place to start would be to extend this study to compare MPS processes and volunteer behaviour across the different constituencies. As suggested in the paper, the MPS process and issues of concern differ from one constituency to another, and it remains to be seen if the results of this study may be useful in understanding the MPS process and behaviours of volunteers elsewhere. Another future possibility to extend the results of this research would be also to consider factors such as the gender, class, income and occupation of the volunteers in how they play out in their decision-making role at MPS in terms of discretion and emotions. These dimensions are essential components that guide personal dispositions, which could have a bearing on their thought processes and subjectivities and thus affect the kinds of decisions made. Apart from that, it would also be useful to understand how the MPS carried out by opposition parties fit into this framework. Coming from a less than dominant position in the political order, their success at writing appeals on behalf of their residents could teach us more about MPS as a way for the government and thus the dominant party to return in kind the votes they received from residents. It would also be interesting to see if this model of decision-making and agency in assisting people can be extended to understand the disbursement of help by social welfare associations and charities.

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APPENDIX ONE: PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

Respondent No.	No. of Years as an MPS Volunteer	Living within Constituency Studied?	Also a grassroots volunteer?	Age Range	Gender
1	12	Yes	Yes	50s	Male
2	16	No	Yes	50s	Male
3	1	Yes	Yes	30s	Male
4	1	Yes	No	20s	Male
5	2	No	No	60s	Male
6	11	No	Yes	40s	Male
7	13	No	Yes	60s	Female
8	12	Yes	Yes	30s	Male
9	4	Yes	Yes	30s	Female
10	2	Yes	No	20s	Male
11	12	Yes	Yes	40s	Female
12	2	No	No	20s	Female
13	3	Yes	Yes	20s	Female
14	10	Yes	Yes	40s	Female